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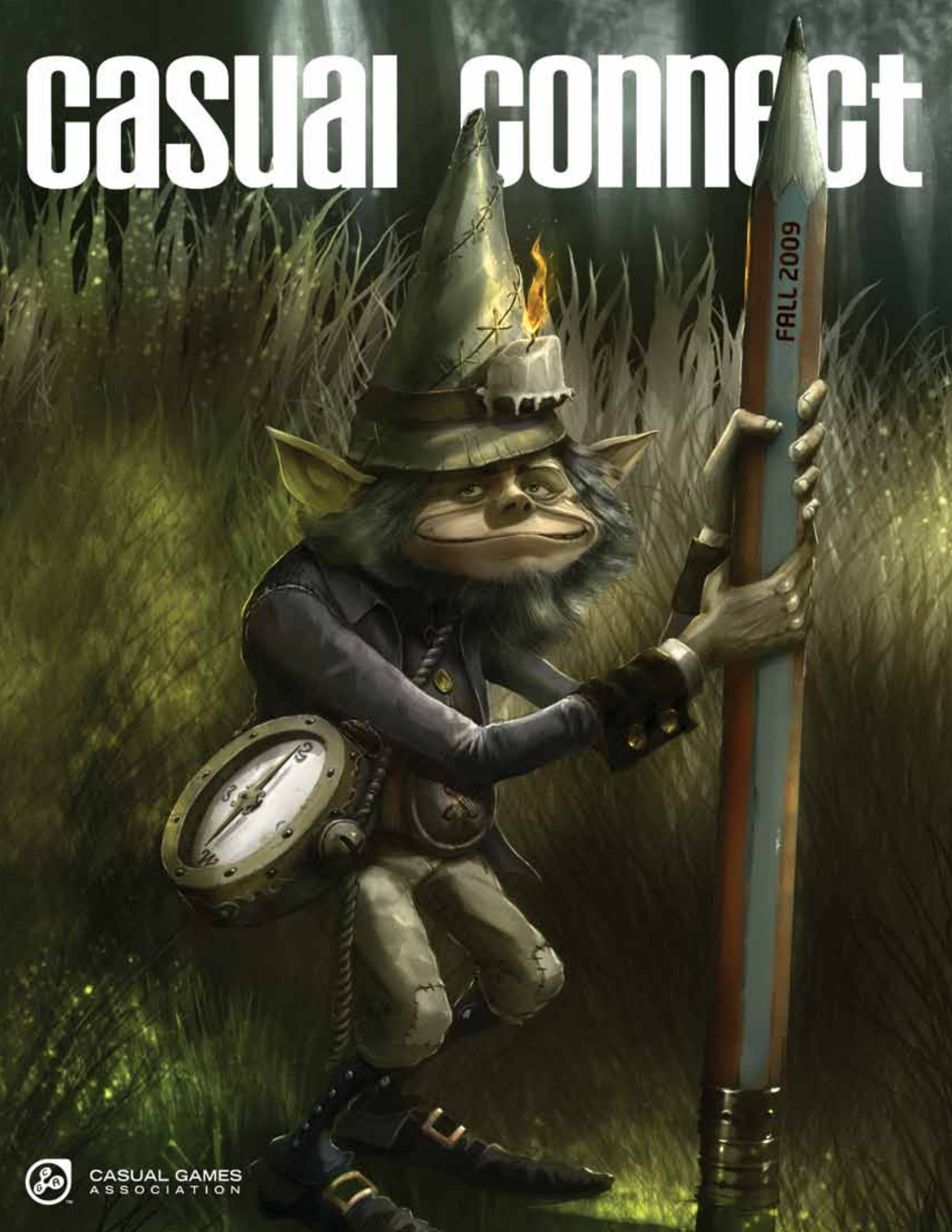

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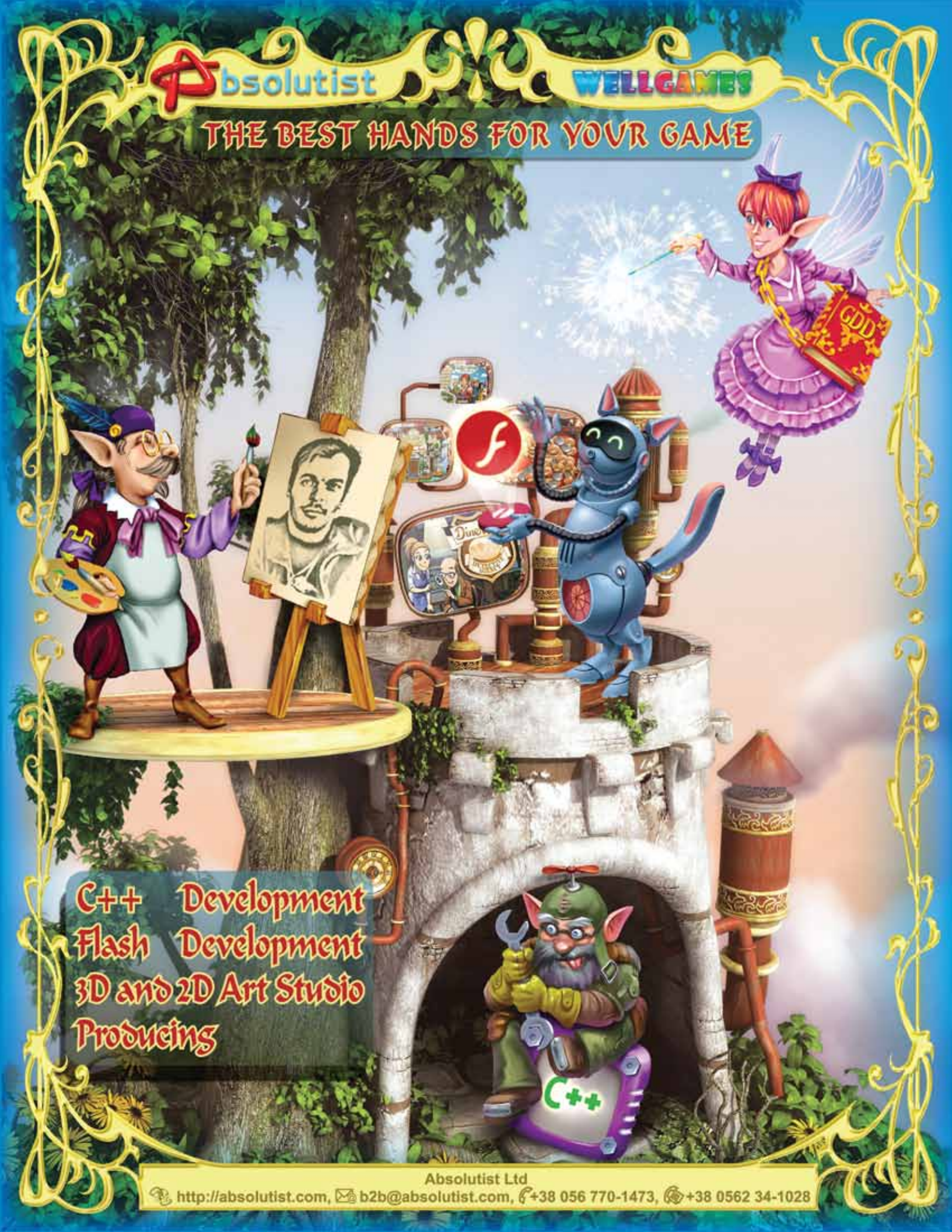
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On the Cover:

The concept piece you see on our cover is one of several amazing artworks created to depict the creatures from *Little Folk of Faery,* the first casual downloadable title produced by Orange. Inspired by folklore and legends, the game invites you to discover a miniature world—tightly intertwined with our own—inhabited by fairies and mythical creatures.

A casual sim game with elements of exploration, adventure, and management, *Little Folk of Faery* was developed for Orange by the French studio Kylotonn. "With direction from the Orange team", says Creative Director Yann Tambellini, "we aimed for an art style with rich, old-looking textures and strong vegetal presence. Art Nouveau and traditional European illustrators provided plenty of reference material to design the game, which was supposed to depict creatures and animals that would appear cute but not cartoonish. The Leprechaun which you can see on the cover is one of the creatures that you can control throughout the adventure."

For more information please check www.littlefolkoffaery.com.

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Fall 2009
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Contact Us
Corporate Participation:
Luke Burtis, luke@casualconnect.org
Address Changes and Subscription:
Tennille Forsberg, tennille@casualconnect.org
Article Submission and Comments:
editor@casualconnect.org

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Letter from the Director

"Stick a fork in 'em," they said. "Casual games are done. Dead. Kaput."

Last year we heard it all: how we had had a good run but were starting to sputter; how we had lost our sense of innovation; how our business model was broken. Our critics were pushing and shoving to be in on the grave-digging, congratulating themselves that those pesky little casual games were on the way out—*at last!*—restoring order to the universe of "real games."

Well, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of our death are greatly exaggerated.

This past year has been tough for everyone in every industry. But the fact that casual games have fared so well—without the benefit of any sort of government stimulus, I might add—says a lot about the resiliency of our not-so-little industry. Once again we are going strong, attracting fans by the millions and quieting our critics as we do so. And oh yeah, we're making a pretty good living at this, by the way.

And with good reason. No other sector of the gaming industry has worked so hard to offer such a diversity of products. And no other has succeeded at attracting such a diverse group of fans. But hasn't that always been the point of casual games? We've always been about providing simple fun on a multiplicity of platforms for as wide an audience as possible.

Done? *As if.* Dead? *Hardly*. Kaput? *Please*. Casual games are alive and well, thank you very much. And we're not going away.

Jessica

Jessica can be reached at jessica@casualconnect.org.

Winning an RFP

How to Land a Contract (from a Publisher's Perspective)

By Lloyd Melnick

Lloyd Melnick has been involved with publishing and licensing computer and video games for over 16 years. As a Co-Founder of Merscom, Lloyd has marketed, produced and published over 150 games for the casual, core and social gamer markets. In the last two years, Lloyd has led the developer selection process for more than 35 casual and social media game projects. He was also responsible for building Merscom's relationships with Paramount, CBS, Starz Media, National Geographic, CAA, Showtime Networks, uClick and Granada Ventures. Lloyd played a key role in the development and launch of multiple #1 hits, including Blood Ties, Righteous Kill *and* Herod's Lost Tomb. *Lloyd has also developed and implemented Merscom's online and retail distribution networks both in the U.S. and Europe. He can be reached at LSM@merscom.com.*

In this tough economic environment, it is important for game developers to have a constant stream of projects. Even if you are focused on creating your own IP and publishing directly through portals, contract work allows you to balance cash flow and to finance your internal projects. The current economic situation has made it more difficult to get this contract work, however, as more developers are chasing fewer projects. This article will provide insight from a publisher's perspective on the RFP process and the criteria used to select development teams.

How the Process Works

The RFP process is one of the most important elements of a publisher's business. Choosing the appropriate development team for a project has huge implications: initial cost; revenue from the game; brand image with consumers, portals and media companies; and scheduling. With so much at stake, publishers put significant resources into finding and choosing the best developer for a project.

A beautifully written and organized proposal shows a well-structured development team, one dedicated to a quality product.

The first stage in the process is creating the high-level concept for the game, determining what features will differentiate it in the market, and defining the scope of the game. Once this overview is completed, the publisher's greenlight committee usually meets and decides whether or not to proceed with the project.

Once a project is green-lit, the publisher creates an RFP to send to potential development partners. The RFP will include a high-level overview of the game, the platforms that need to be supported (PC, Mac, iPhone, etc.), key features that need to be included, budget range, preferred schedule, and other details important to that publisher.

The next step for a publisher is to create a shortlist of developers for the RFP. Normally, a publisher's first choice is to turn to a team with which it has just finished a successful project. The publisher wants both to reward the developer for a job well done and to work with a known entity. If that developer is not available or the project is not a good fit, the publisher needs to spread a wider net. This is done by sending the RFP to developers it has worked with in the past and had good results with, to promising teams it has met at tradeshows or online, and to studios that have created successful, comparable games. Once the RFP is disseminated, the publisher usually allows two to three weeks for responses.

Once proposals are submitted to the publisher, the intensive work begins. Usually, the producer for the project takes the lead in reviewing the various proposals. At Merscom, the first stage is to "triage" the proposals, eliminating those that have no chance to win the project (either because of budget, schedule or quality of the proposal). The producer then creates a shortlist of two to four proposals that are the most attractive. We then use an analytic technique to weigh all the key attributes of the proposal on how important that element is to the overall success of the project, grading each developer on that attribute on a scale of 1 to 10. Once the proposals are scored, the producer either selects the proposal that got the highest score, or one within one standard deviation of that score.

What the Publisher Is Looking For

So what are the attributes publishers weigh when choosing a developer? Although every publisher has different priorities, most consider the following attributes important:

- Track record of the studio
- Track record of the key individuals on the team
- Budget
- Schedule
- Production methodology

- Successes in the genre
- Art ability
- Game design ability
- Writing ability (if not provided by the publisher)
- Design proposed for the specific project
- Technology (if not provided by the publisher)
- Project management process
- Responsiveness
- References

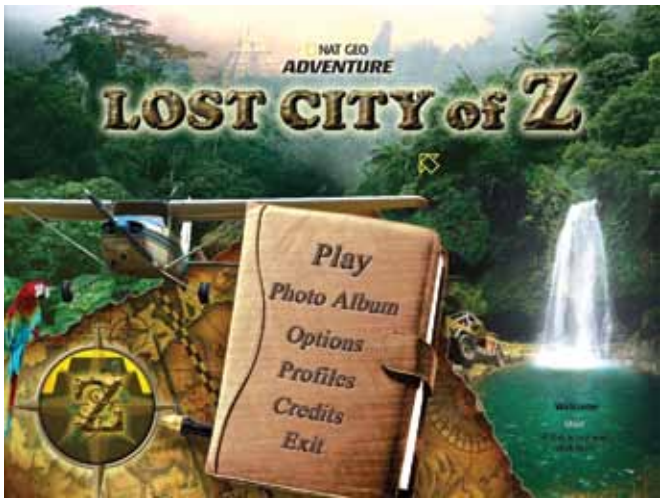
When submitting your proposal, it is important that you address all these attributes clearly and specifically. If there is a particular area in which you are weak, you should not ignore it (the publisher certainly won't); rather, you should address it directly and provide reasons why your team should still be considered. For example, if the proposal calls for a building sim and your team has not done one before, you should highlight the games you have done that show your art and programming skill and how that skill can be used on this project.

While much of the analysis is based on objective data, you have a lot of control over whether your proposal gets that far. In the current economy, publishers can pick between many talented teams that offer competitive pricing. You should focus on creating the strongest possible presentation so that the publisher will want to delve deeper into whether you have the best team for the project. The presentation is also a very strong reflection of your team. A weak proposal will keep you from being considered not only for the project but possibly for future work with that publisher as well.

Writing a Winning Proposal

If you have not worked with the publisher before, the proposal is the best indicator to the publisher of what it's like to work with you. A sloppy proposal suggests sloppy game development. A superficial proposal suggests superficial work. Conversely, a beautifully written and organized proposal shows a well-structured development team, one dedicated to a quality product. In particular, you should:

- *Address the specific project.* Most publishers will identify immediately and reject a generic proposal. Your proposal needs to be tailored specifically for the game in the RFP. It needs to show how that game will be special and why your team really believes it can create a great game based on the idea.
- *Include relevant artwork.* It is most effective if you create mock-ups or screens for this specific game. It shows commitment and allows the publisher to envision how the game will turn out. If creating new art is impossible, the artwork should still be relevant to the project. Even if you have done fantastic 3D tank renders, it is not going to impress a casual game publisher looking for a hidden object game set on a farm.
- *Make sure the proposal is well written—in the language of the publisher.* If it is an American publisher and your first language is not English, you should hire a native English speaker to edit the proposal. Although Merscom (and other American publishers) have chosen multiple developers with proposals that were not perfectly written, a poorly crafted proposal puts you at a distinct disadvantage.
- *Create a realistic budget.* The publisher will probably make its decision based on the budget in the proposal—so put forward your most competitive offer. Once a different developer is selected, the publisher is unlikely to then cancel the project just because you came back with a much better offer. What's more, such changes cast doubt on your entire proposal.
- *Clearly show your organization and methodology.* With casual games, it is crucial to have a good development methodology, and this process should be shown clearly in the proposal. If you can chart out your development process (in a professional-looking graphic), it shows that the game is not being developed haphazardly.
- *Be responsive.* Again, your response speed during the RFP process is the best indicator of how responsive you will be during the development process. Prioritize communications with the publisher, responding to all the emails you receive quickly, providing clear timeline updates, answering any follow-up questions the day you receive them. Overall, your goal should be to make the publisher comfortable that you will be easy to reach and that you will respond quickly if issues come up.
- *Ask questions.* Rather than trying to guess what the publisher wants, ask them for clarification. Such questions show the publisher you really want the business. They also help you avoid proposing a game very different from what they want.
- *Be on time.* If you cannot get the proposal in by the deadline, what does it say about your ability to hit milestone dates?



Artwork needs to be relevant. 3D tank renders are not going to impress a casual game publisher looking for a hidden object game set on a farm. Make sure your artwork is up to industry standards, such as this piece from National Geographic's Lost City of Z.

Any one of these factors can rule out your development team, or put you at the top of the heap.

It's Not Over When a Proposal Has Been Selected

Whether or not you have been selected for the project, the process does not end when the publisher has selected a developer. With most casual game publishers developing five to 30 games per year, the real opportunity will be in front of you.

If you have won the project, your performance during the project will either mean a future stream of work (and cash), or it will leave you scrambling for more work in a few months. Many of the issues

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Winning an RFP

How to Land a Contract (from a Publisher's Perspective)

discussed above are even more important when you begin working together. It's critical that you remain responsive, professional, organized, on time, and on budget.

Also, before bidding for the project, ensure it is a project you really want to work on. Do not take a project—or a budget—that is not consistent with your company's strategy. Although it is good to build up a working relationship with a publisher, your work on the project will provide the best indication of how you will perform on future projects. If you offer a lower budget than you can comfortably work with, you will have to cut corners—and that will suggest to the publisher that that is how you always develop. Also, if it is a game you do not believe in, you are likely to run into issues regarding the direction of the project that will either require costly revisions or leave everyone dissatisfied.

If you have not won the project, there will be many other opportunities to work with the publisher if you handle the situation professionally. The worst thing to do after being told you were not awarded the project is to act defensively or whine. Such actions only confirm the decision the publisher has made. Instead, express your regrets that you were not selected and explain how much you want to build a relationship with the publisher. More importantly, ask specifically what they considered weak in your proposal and how you can improve it in the future. Then ask if you will be considered for future RFPs, and if not, what you can do to change their minds. If the prospects are good, ask when they expect to have new RFPs available (it is always good to follow up on available RFPs regularly, as publishers have notoriously weak memories). Persistence is crucial; you may not win a project until your fourth or fifth proposal, but every proposal should be considered a marketing document that brings you closer to a relationship with the publisher.

"Include mock-ups or screens created specifically for the proposed game. It shows commitment and allows the publisher to envision how the game will turn out."

In this competitive environment, it is increasingly difficult but increasingly important to win new business. At the end of the day, it comes down to presenting your company professionally and demonstrating your firm's ability to create a great game at a competitive price. ■

Prioritize communications with the publisher, responding to all the emails you receive quickly, providing clear timeline updates, answering any follow-up questions the day you receive them.

Before You Take the Plunge

What to Expect from Work-for-Hire Game Development

By Mariana Cardoso

Mariana Cardoso is General Manager of GAMEINVEST, responsible for the strategy implementation, business development, and operational management of the company and all of its gaming and animation products. Mariana has a background in media, advertising, and technology, and holds a B.A. in Marketing from the Institute of Visual Arts, Design, and Marketing (IADE) in Portugal, as well as a Certificate in Marketing from New York University. In addition to her work at GAMEINVEST, Mariana is actively involved in the IGDA (International Game Developers Association) and WIGI (Women in Games International). Before joining GAMEINVEST in August 2007, Mariana worked at YDreams Mobile Entertainment, where she was responsible for the launch of several notable mobile titles, including Cristiano Ronaldo Underworld Football. *Mariana's global experience in the media and technology industries also includes work at Siemens in Lisbon, Reynardus and Moya Advertising in New York, and Latina Europa's "Channel Zero" project, an online Portuguese music television channel. She can be reached at mariana.cardoso@gameinvest.net.*

As casual game developers, we are living in both challenging and exciting times. On the one hand, the waters we swim in are getting rougher and rougher by the day; it's much harder to keep your head above water than it was a couple of years ago. Some casual game publishers are anticipating lower revenues for 2009 than in 2008—and for good reason: The NPD group reports that overall revenue from U.S. video game sales dropped at retail 31% to $1.17 billion in June 2009, compared with $1.7 billion a year earlier. On the other hand, there are over 86 million people who play casual games, and the number of women playing casual games on consoles is increasing. In fact, the NPD Group projects women will make up 28% of console gamers in 2009, up from 23% last year.

In hearing about these opportunities, one would assume that development budgets are increasing to meet the demand of the insatiable appetites of these casual gamers, but sadly it isn't so. To remain competitive in today's market, game publishers are slashing retail prices, resulting in lower budgets available for developers to create games.

To overcome these budgetary challenges, take balanced risks, and strengthen your position in this market, the smartest thing you can do is try to achieve a balance between developing original IP and securing work-for-hire projects. Here are some tips for staying afloat in these unfamiliar waters.

To overcome budgetary challenges, take balanced risks, and strengthen your position in this market, the smartest thing you can do is try to achieve a balance between developing original IP and securing work-for-hire projects.

Direct Communication

It is very difficult to get the green light on a work-for-hire project when you have not met the publishers face to face. It can happen, but it's extremely rare for a publisher to award a second or third work-for-hire project without meeting with the developers.

We have found that attending industry events and conferences provides a great opportunity for developers looking for work-for-hire projects to meet publishers. At these events—especially at Casual Connect events where you are immersed in a warm and somewhat intimate setting—you will have a chance to meet with the key players in the market and show them in person how passionate you are about developing games, how well you can communicate your ideas, and how committed you are to working in a tight partnership with them.

Oftentimes, the challenges and issues that may arise during the process of securing work can be avoided or minimized by opening all lines of communication with the publisher with whom you are negotiating. You need to feel comfortable enough with your point of contact at the publisher to ask questions throughout the process. One thing we've learned from our own mistakes is that as developers we need to be adamant about asking for transparency from the publisher. Transparency needs to be bilateral and is essential in a work-for-hire relationship that requires a huge amount of confidence from both parties.

Due Diligence

Most developers who first start pitching work-for-hire services are not aware of the due diligence process they will need to undergo to assure the publisher of their capabilities to deliver a great casual game. As a consequence, many first-time developers are unprepared to present their qualifications, which may cause them to lose the work.

Developers looking for work-for-hire projects must understand that they will be closely evaluated—even scrutinized—by every publisher before moving forward with any project. I recommend preparing properly and trying to be one step ahead of the person who will be evaluating your development studio. When preparing for due diligence at GAMEINVEST, we make a list of the questions we would ask a developer as if we were the ones ordering the work. What would our team need to know in order to be sure that this specific developer is a good company to work with—one that will deliver a great game in the end? When we complete that list, we more or less have the questions the publisher will be asking us. Of course, this is a learning process and you will never be able to anticipate every question, but it will give you the preparation you will need to be confident when meeting with the publisher.

IP Ownership

As developers, we all know the importance and value of owning the IP, and also how frustrating it can be to work on an extremely successful game that becomes a valuable brand and not share part of that success. Nevertheless, you should be prepared to be declined ownership of the IP in a work-for-hire project. The opportunity to own an IP is rarely up for discussion at the negotiating table.

To minimize the downside of not owning the IP you are about to develop, we believe that there are two things a developer can do. One thing you can do is look for the right partner and try to work on a long-term relationship. If you have found that ideal partner, and if the initial project goes well, you will always have an open door to propose and discuss a sequel or a derivative project. The longer you work with a publisher's production team, the tighter the relationship gets and the smoother the whole process gets. Another thing we find rewarding is to negotiate the "right of first refusal" in your contract. It is useful for developers because it grants them the right to negotiate with the publisher first should it decide to order a sequel or a derivative game. Likewise, the "right of first refusal" is useful for the publisher because there is no one else who knows the game better than you do. Consequently, the development process is likely to be easier and more cost- and time-efficient.

Backend Royalties

In some work-for-hire projects there are no backend royalties offered, so developers only get paid for the deliverable milestones. Before moving forward, developers must decide if they are comfortable with this arrangement.

The issue with the lack of backend royalties is directly related to IP ownership. If a publisher declares that IP ownership is "not negotiable," there isn't much a developer can do other than accept it. However, developers should keep in mind that the market is very dynamic and publishers may also need to adapt to the changes. In the casual games space, it is becoming more common to include backend royalties in the negotiation as a way to reward developers for creating a successful game and for being a good partner to the publisher.

Pricing

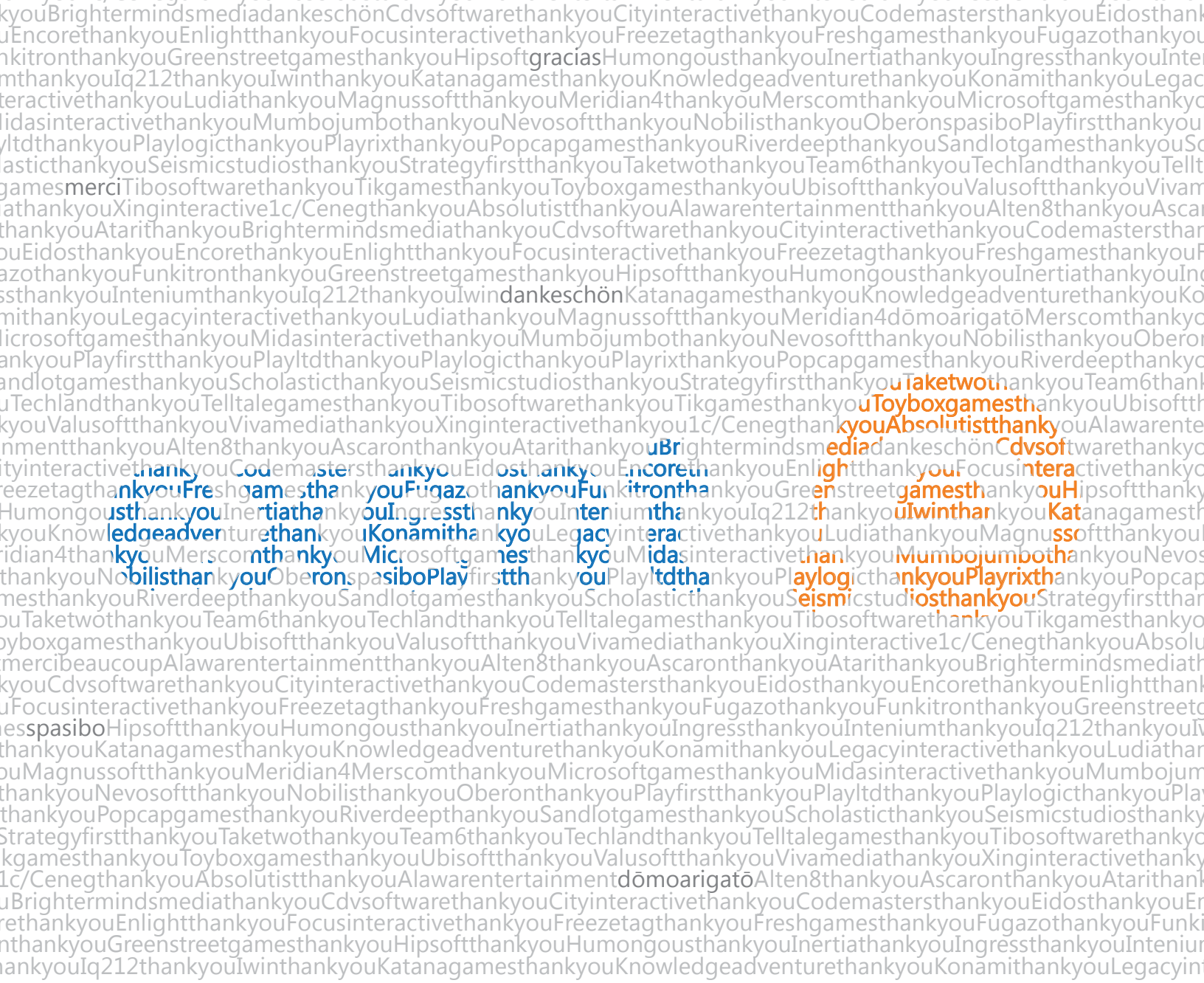
When a publisher is looking to outsource a game or part of a game, you can be sure that it is not only looking for the best game possible, but also the most cost-effective. There will always be a developer willing and capable to develop a good game for a lower asking price. Talented, low-cost developers are constantly sprouting up around the globe, so be prepared for fierce worldwide competition.

The solution to this pricing challenge? Benchmark, benchmark, benchmark! Developers looking for outsourcing projects need to be aware of the prices that are being charged around the world, and then compare their studio to other developers. What are your unique selling points? What added value do you bring to the table on this specific project? Work on your internal processes and technology, so that the whole package that you offer is attractive to the decision makers.

Final Thoughts

I strongly believe that all good outsourcers integrate the following into their mantra: good communication, the spirit of initiative, flexibility, creative problem-solving, strong listening skills, honesty and transparency. If you can make it your own and work hard to achieve these key qualities, then you are ready to take that plunge. ■

All good outsourcers integrate the following into their mantra: good communication, the spirit of initiative, flexibility, creative problem-solving, strong listening skills, honesty and transparency.



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The (Mythical) Seven-Hour Game Player Theory

Separating Fact from Fiction

Some people will tell you that club models—and the price reductions that come with them—are good for business. Not this guy. And since we've never been inclined to choose sides (except when ordering fast food), we figured you might be interested in hearing another perspective on the decline in game prices.
—ed.

By Sean Vanderdasson

Sean Vanderdasson has been with WildTangent since June 2004 and is responsible for global retail marketing and sales of WildTangent's products. He can be reached at sean.vanderdasson@casualconnect.org.

Perhaps you've heard of The Seven-Hour Game Player Theory (as espoused by some game portals). It goes something like this: *Casual gamers play approximately seven hours of games per month. Therefore, to have consumers purchase games regularly (that is, monthly), all casual games should have around seven hours of game-play. And since all games should have the same amount of game-play, they should all be sold for the same price ($6.99).*

Simple math, right?

Not really. This math has some inherent biases: 1) it assumes consumers value all game-play at $1 per hour regardless of the game; and 2) it assumes that consumers would always prefer to own a game if possible. No other modern form of entertainment (movies, TV shows, music, etc.) follows this one-size-fits-all pricing and consumption model.

Have you begun receiving smaller checks from some of your online publishing partners? Did these same publishers tell you that casual games are now only worth $6.99, regardless of your game's quality or amount of game-play?

So does the Seven-Hour Game Player Theory have merit or does it mark the beginning of the end for those developers and publishers who maintain a death-grip on the increasingly obsolete purchase-only business model? Based on my conversations with developers from all over the world, it appears more and more developers are realizing that the seven-hour gamer is either a myth or at least a dying reality.

Don't believe me? Have you begun receiving smaller checks from some of your online publishing partners? Did these same publishers tell you that casual games are now only worth $6.99, regardless of your game's quality or amount of game-play? Have they blamed the economy for the decline in your revenue checks even though report after report continues to show casual game play is increasing and is one of the few financial bright spots in today's economy? In other words, is there any real data justifying the commoditization of your games?

Implications of the Seven-Hour Game Player Theory

Let's imagine that the Seven-Hour Game Player Theory is, in fact, true. If so, the theory has the following implications:

Implication #1: Innovation is not worth the risk.

If games are truly worth only $6.99 at retail and garner no more than seven hours of game-play, a stifling of innovation will soon follow. You might not develop new game mechanics because they cannot be artificially jammed into the seven hour rule. Storytelling, sometimes the heart of a game, might become lost entirely. In other words, you might limit yourself to the world of hidden object games until consumers tire of playing those (as we all know they will).

A more realistic view is this: Some great games only have an hour or so of game-play (think premium Flash games), whereas other games have a natural 40, 50, 60+ hours of game-play. So, why limit yourself to seven hours? More specifically, why limit yourself when competitors will surely rise to fill the void you create and make you vulnerable to changing consumer interests?

The (Mythical) Seven-Hour Game Player Theory

Separating Fact from Fiction

Don't forget who's telling you games are only worth $6.99. It isn't the consumer. In fact, put a great game in front of a consumer and they'll pay what *they* think the game is worth.

Implication #2: Consumers will find other things to do with their time and money.

One of the basic rules of Economics 101 is this: *Consumers are not stupid.* Translation: Over time, consumers will identify excellent products and services and allocate their spending accordingly. Consumers always vote with their wallets and their time even though behaviors and tastes are continually changing. So, if you do not stay alert, innovate, and adapt, consumers will move on without you, and you are guaranteed one thing: ever-shrinking revenue checks.

Consumers have changed their game-playing behavior dramatically over the years. We've witnessed the introduction of console games, mobile games, flash games, MMOs, iPhone apps, and now social gaming. The emergence of these new forms of games does not necessarily mean consumers are abandoning one for the other. Rather, consumers are evolving to match games to their circumstances. Location, time, convenience, cost, payment methods, game mechanics, and personal preference all influence what and how and when we play. One of the great strengths of the casual game development community is its unmatched ability to create games of varying difficulty, mechanics and value. And the best new ideas will be rewarded through consumer spending. Remember, it's not consumers who have said they are only willing to spend $6.99 for a title.

The bottom line: The Seven-Hour Game Player Theory is a myth. It is not only false, but its very propagation by game portals sets the entire industry back a decade.

Do we really want our industry to become a melting pot of seven-hour, seven-dollar games that you pick up at the virtual check stand next to the myriad packs of gum? Or, do we want to continue forging ahead with quality games that push the envelope of development while offering gamers incredible value for their dollar? Why in the world would one believe all games should be priced at $6.99? Why would some game portals want that?

The Seven-Hour Game Player Theory is a myth. It is not only false, but its very propagation by game portals sets the entire industry back a decade.

Overcoming the Seven-Hour Game Player Theory

There is a solution to this seven-hour/seven-dollar death spiral though. It comes down to lifecycle management. Here are some suggestions of how to manage a good game:

1. Initially, launch your game only on your website and partner sites that support your product lifecycle and brand strategy, including your MSRP strategy, promotional philosophy, etc. That means, of course, that you really should not offer discount sales on your new game on your site or via other promotions. If you do, you're acknowledging that the MSRP you suggested is not valid.
2. As you get revenue results (not solely unit sales) from your partners and your own site, you can determine whether you wish to offer your game in physical retail stores. Many retailers often require some success metrics before putting your game onto their increasingly limited shelf space. Fortunately, you'll have details of how your game has performed at the MSRP along with other metrics.
3. Next, you should consider your second tier of online distribution partners—game portals that will work with you on your next phase of the product lifecycle. You may have to lower you price some at this stage—perhaps from $19.99 to $14.99 or even $9.99 (but not to the bargain basement $6.99). Again, launch and look for the results—specifically, velocity at the lower price. Are you making up in volume the revenue lost due to lower prices?
4. Finally, you should start thinking about the final phase of distribution—the "everything is $6.99 or lower" discount sellers, the Dollar Stores of online games. Some may bemoan that they won't take your title because it isn't "new." But they can't have it both ways. They can't price a new title at an old title price and expect to get the latest and greatest.

Now, don't get me wrong. Deep discounters do serve a purpose, even in the digital world. They supply the "long-tail" of content that can bring in small streams of revenue that can add up at the end of a game's lifecycle. They can help you milk a few remaining dollars out of a good product and can sometimes even sell substantial numbers of units at these deeply discounted prices. They are also good if you have a mediocre or poor game and simply need to recover the costs. But remember, discount publishers do not build your brand—they only build their own.

These discounters are all about offering the lowest price—and as a result, they attract an audience of bargain hunters. They do not attract consumers primarily focused on quality, innovation, or creative games. They also train their customers that their low price is the only price one should ever pay for a game. So, if you're seriously trying to build a brand and to maximize the revenues of your game, this really isn't a viable new game launch option.

Are there several other options you could pursue? Sure—there always are. However, this was meant as a straightforward approach to lifecycle management of your games. I am not making light of the fact that there are difficult financial decisions to make, but if you want to "right the ship," this is a reasonable solution.

A Better Theory

So if the Seven-Hour Game Player Theory really is a myth, what theory should you follow? I suggest the following alternative: *Build great games you are passionate about. Not all casual games are created equal. Don't believe anyone who claims every casual game should be priced the same (even if they claim to have the math to back it up).* Do that, and you'll be just fine. That's a fact. ■

In Search of the Philosopher's Stone

Turning New Ideas into Gold

In the world of film, practically every movie belongs to one genre or another, and nobody criticizes a writer, director or producer for making a cinematic reference or taking an idea to the next level.

A similar situation has emerged in the casual games industry, as most of the overwhelming number of products released fall into a small number of popular genres. The market has fully established itself while becoming more transparent than ever. It's easy to know which projects players will like—just look at the top-selling games on a handful of key game portals. On the whole, this situation is advantageous for developers, especially those just starting out in casual games. They have all of the cards in their hand; the transparency of the market allows them to create decent projects and market them successfully.

The War of the Clones Is Over

You may have noticed that the offensive word *clone* has all but disappeared from the gaming dictionary. Specialists in the casual games industry have started defining things within established genres. Furthermore, research into the casual games market that Alawar conducted in May of this year shows that large groups of users prefer games of just one genre and don't bother looking into other kinds of products. So today you can create a brilliant game in a particular genre and not have to worry about being accused of plagiarism. You can even specialize in one genre and retain a faithful user audience.

Follow new trends, but don't forget to continue playing old games. Everything new is just something old and forgotten (well, mostly anyway).

However, there's more going on here than meets the eye. Instead of going the easy route, many participants in the casual games market are experimenting, trying to create something new and original outside the boundaries of an established genre. Essentially, the same situation exists in cinema. There are blockbusters, but there are also auteur films. Many of these movies become quite successful among enthusiasts, although few manage to approach the box office success of *Titanic*.

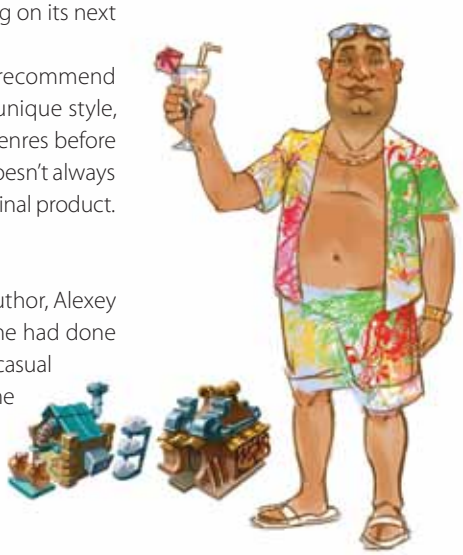
Any attempt to create an original product in the casual games industry is linked to the fact that experienced teams know how much money an innovative product can bring in. Everyone remembers the incredible success of *Zuma,* which won several Game of the Year awards in 2004. And many dream of reproducing this success; indeed, these kinds of products have always been and will always be a source of fame and fortune for developers. Having released the next blockbuster, a company can rest on its laurels for a long time, leisurely working on its next masterpiece without worrying about how much money it's spending to make it.

But to those who dream of setting out on a quest for the Philosopher's Stone, I recommend trying your hand at more traditional projects, establishing your footing, acquiring a unique style, and gaining some experience first. Release a couple of games in one of the popular genres before embarking on an experiment. You don't have to work with a template, however. Form doesn't always define content; even in the most established, conservative genres, you can create an original product.

The Union of Innovation and Tradition

An example of this union of innovation and tradition is the game *Farm Frenzy*. Its author, Alexey Meleshkevich, took the standard business simulator and set it on a farm, which no one had done before. As a result, he reaped his reward, releasing one of the most successful and unique casual games in recent times. And having secured a good reputation, he began working on the experimental MMOG project, *Dream Farm,* and the casual strategy game, *Island Realms.*

I always look at non-traditional projects with great caution because the tastes of producers and players rarely match up. An original, one-of-a-kind game might have its programmers in a state of ecstasy but fail to draw the slightest whiff of interest



By Kirill Plotnikov

Kirill Plotnikov has produced more than 90 games for Alawar, most of which have become financial successes. His hits include The Treasures of Montezuma, Stand o' Food, Farm Frenzy, Farm Frenzy 2, Natalie Brooks—Secrets of Treasure House, Beach Party Craze, Pet Show Craze, Sprill—The Mystery of The Bermuda Triangle, Virtual Farm, The Treasures Of Mystery Island *and other well-known titles. Mr. Plotnikov graduated from the Mechanical and Mathematical School at Novosibirsk State University with a degree in programming. He can be reached at kirill.plotnikov@casualconnect.org*

In Search of the Philosopher's Stone

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from a casual gamer. Thus, we must rely more on logic than emotion; after all, hasty decisions have destroyed many talented teams.

Just remember that while experience allows producers to make big decisions, they shouldn't discard the creative element and base their decisions solely on data. The problem lies in the fact that it's impossible to invent anything new by relying on tradition alone. The ideal is found somewhere along the continuum between creativity and the demands of the audience—although finding this is by no means easy.

One of the major advantages of original projects is the comparatively cheap process of developing them. This is connected to human psychology. If a game differs from other similar forms of entertainment and the consumer likes it, then his expectations for the graphics, the strength of the subject matter, and the length of the game will be lower.

Also, when embarking on the creation of an experimental project, I recommend following a time-honored rule: Save some of the game's features for the sequel. If your game is a hit, then features thought out in advance will come in handy in the follow-up.

To those who dream of setting out on a quest for the Philosopher's Stone, I recommend trying your hand at more traditional projects, establishing your footing, acquiring a unique style, and gaining some experience first.

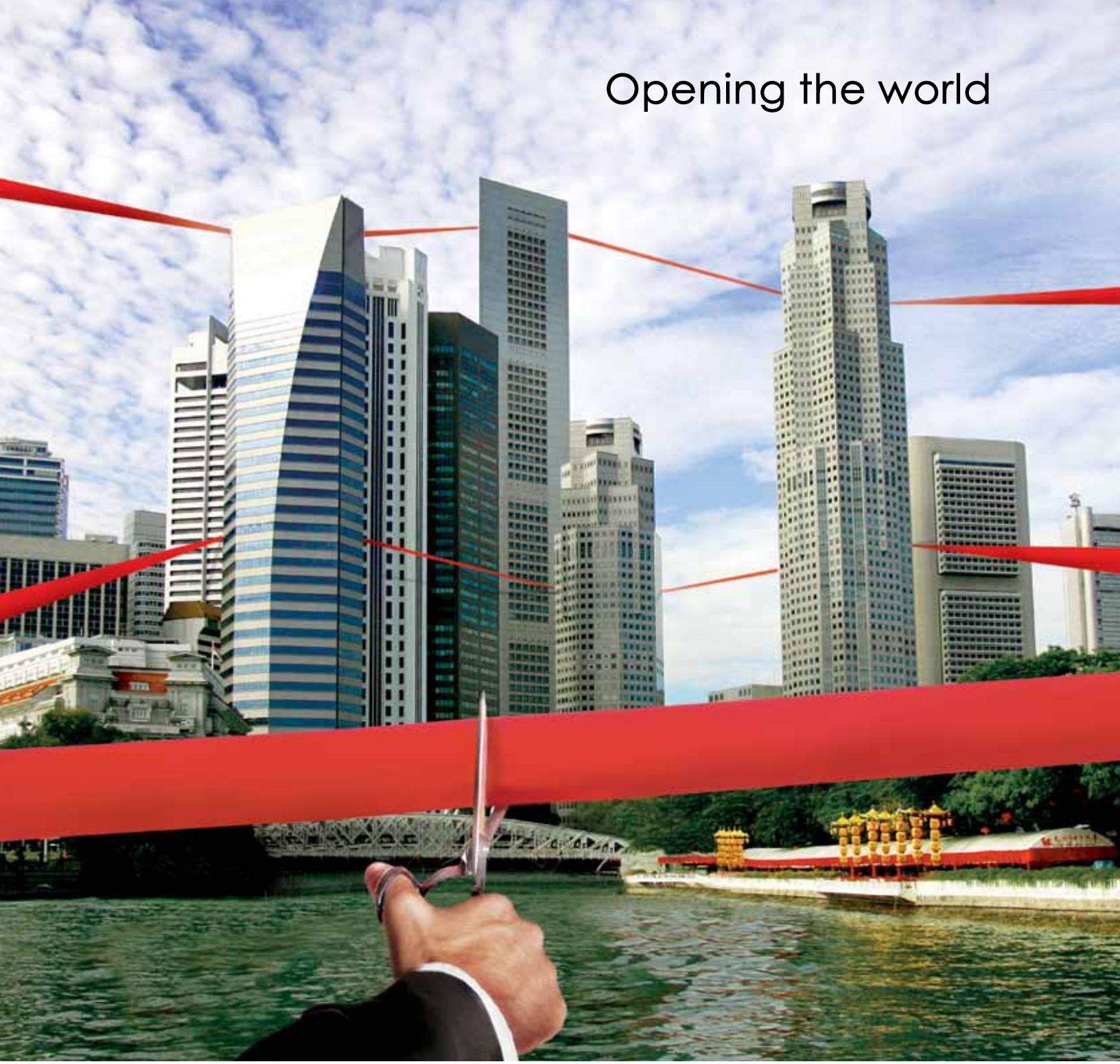
Finding and Assessing New Ideas

Creativity is not a controlled process, of course, and interesting ideas can appear in any team member's head. Some ideas might seem impossible, but if someone with experience and knowledge of the market believes in them, the results can be mind-blowing. As a model of how a producer should act toward his idea people, consider Dr. Gregory House on the TV series, *House, M.D.* From him, we can learn how to give instructions and communicate with a team. House doesn't think up anything on his own—he can't generate these unusual solutions by himself—but by listening to his colleagues and tapping into their thoughts, he always seems to find the answer.

In my work, I try to check that the ideas for a product correspond with some of the key features of a successful casual game. Here are just a few of my selection criteria:

- *Easy to pick up*—It's essential that new material be easy for players to get the hang of. People flock to simplicity. Use actions everyone understands naturally. Let players serve food, grow plants, match colored gems and do a host of other simple, familiar tasks.
- *Can learn it in half an hour*—In the space of the game's first 30 minutes, you must reveal all of the important nuances of the gameplay. If you don't do that, don't be surprised if users grow bored and download another game. The casual industry might be young, but the market is already established. If you want to show players the originality of your project, then do it as fast as possible.
- *Graphics are everything*—Give the visuals in your game special attention. If a play begins at the coat check, then a game starts at its opening screen. It's better to make a small amount of content but make its quality very high. Attractive game characters can achieve cult status and become the face of a brand, as with Mario and Sonic. Graphics are the "engine" that will take your game to the masses.
- *Look to the future but don't forget the past*—Follow new trends, but don't forget to continue playing old games. Everything new is just something old and forgotten (well, mostly anyway). Often, someone else thought up your revolutionary idea and brought it to life long ago. But don't despair; ideas are all around you. And furthermore, finished products are a great way to carry out an idea, evaluate its success and make important conclusions. Do not reject your ideas if someone has done something similar; if you took one design and gave it to two teams, the result would be two different games.

Of course, the basic principle of any creative work is that an idea means nothing if it's not brought to fruition. When coming up with new games, I always think of specific developers. Each team has its strong and weak points. It's vital, therefore, that you settle on the solution that's best for you. And it's important that you love your work. That's the biggest key to success, the Philosopher's Stone that can turn any idea—even the craziest one—into gold. ■



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The Making of *Virtual Families*

A Virtual-Life Postmortem

By Arthur Humphrey

Arthur Humphrey is Founder and Lead Designer of Last Day of Work, a San Francisco-based developer of games for the casual audience. Last Day of Work has created an uninterrupted string of hits, including Fish Tycoon, Plant Tycoon *and the popular* Virtual Villagers *series. Arthur started creating games on his VIC-20, continued along the Amiga/Commodore path, and finally made a career out of creating innovative games for PC/MAC with a very small team and no outside funding. Arthur holds a Bachelor in Business from UCLA and a Bachelor in Computer Science from Hayward State University. He can be reached at arthur.humphrey@casualconnect.org*

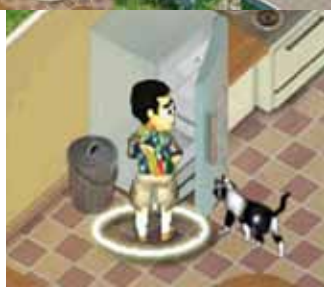
With the continued success of our *Virtual Villagers* franchise, it had occurred to us here at Last Day of Work (many, many times, in fact) that it would be fun to bring the core of the game into a contemporary setting. The enormous success of *The Sims* franchise also gave us confidence that an audience sufficient to support a game like this would almost certainly exist in the casual space. So with these rough ideas in mind, we set out in the fall of 2008 to create a very casual family simulation that would fit the casual market and serve true casual players. *Virtual Families* was born.

Why Compete with *The Sims?*

To anyone who has played both *Virtual Families* and *The Sims* it is very clear that they are not the same game. Some people, and specifically some reviewers, were very confused because thematically the games are identical: They are both family/life simulations that take place in a house. They are both doll-houses in motion. Beyond that, however, the two games have almost no game mechanics in common. *Virtual Families* is much more about grand themes of life (health, life, death, fertility, career), while *The Sims* focuses more on interior decorating, ordering pizzas and micromanaging your little people. In addition, the little people in *Virtual Families* are aware of the player: They respond to praise and scolding, learn from you—even write you letters from time to time. Furthermore, *Virtual Families* is drag-and-drop with very little customization, and runs in real-time (even when the game is "off").

Our limited marketing research suggested that many casual players found that The Sims *wasn't really a casual game at all. In fact, there has never been a pure life sim available in the casual space.*

Our limited marketing research suggested that many casual players found that *The Sims* wasn't really a casual game at all. In fact, there has never been a pure life sim available in the casual space. So we were eager to bring a completely new and original type of offering to people used to hidden-object games, time-management games, and match-three games.



What Went Right

- ***The General Concept***

Our intention was to make a truly casual family simulator. In order to make the game familiar to *Virtual Villagers* fans, we retained the simple drag-and-drop interface of the original. We also wanted the game to be full of emergent drama: life, death, love, dating, fertility, illness—the heavy issues of life.

On the other hand, we didn't want the game to be about buying 19 kinds of Ikea couches. We preferred to focus on consequences, compatibility, personality, happiness, and generations. We poured our own experiences into the game, as well as those of our friends and families, and we were really satisfied with the result. We have had players write us lengthy emails describing their virtual families over generations. We have had people Tweeting as their family grows and develops ("Kel just left for college! The folks are a bit down. 1 down 3 to go.").

The game appears to have struck the most resonant chord with the truly casual players who were unable or unwilling to become engaged by *The Sims.* Such players have found the mechanics to be much simpler and faster to learn. In addition, there are two other aspects of the game that make it easy for casual players to pick up: 1) It is much easier on the hardware and can be played on older computers; and 2) it can be purchased and downloaded quickly and easily online. Those two things alone set *Virtual Families* apart by itself in the market it currently serves.

Development Statistics

Full-time Team: 1 producer, 1 designer/lead engineer, 1 additional engineer, 1 QA engineer

Part-time Team: 6 artists, 1 audio studio (3-4 part-time composers/sound engineers), 1 additional engineer

Months of development: 11

Estimated development cost: $280,000.00

Months of panic: 3

Months spent raiding in *World of Warcraft* while pretending to work: 1.5

Estimated coffee consumption at LDW in-house: 217 liters

- ***Emergence***

Virtual Families was intended to be about emergence. Emergence, in the context of game design, is the concept of setting up rules and mechanics that come together to produce unpredictable results for the player (and potentially even for the developer!) when the game is set into motion. From the first moment of the game you flip through a myriad of generative adoption candidates. They are procedural both in appearance and in personality, and some of the attributes are visible (desire to have children) while some remain hidden (capacity to have children). Once the generated adoption candidate is selected, the dating mechanic begins.

You begin screening potential mate candidates looking for just the right one to marry. Someone who's attractive and rich (and perhaps interested in having kids) would be ideal, but time is not your ally; consequently many players eventually feel compelled to settle for someone. These candidates are also procedural, obviously, and the result already is an emergent narrative about your little guy or gal. Was it hard to find that special someone? Do they even want to be in a couple? Next comes kids and career—and then the game will throw curveballs at you. A tenacious illness through the house? A child who is lazy and stupid? A mismatched marriage? A nosy neighbor? All of these elements combine into a totally unique and emergent story that is all about your family. When you have played through the first generation, the offspring (if any) of your choice inherits the house and continues. The result is that when you are finished playing *Virtual Families*, you have experienced a story unique to you—in contrast, say, to a hidden-object game in which you and a friend would have the exact same experience.

- ***Artificial Intelligence***

We rebuilt the AI from scratch for *Virtual Families*. We wanted an AI that was even more emergent than the one that we use in *Virtual Villagers.* The result was good, although imperfect—suitably unpredictable but sometimes a little unbelievable as well. Still, we consider it a success. The AI system in *Virtual Families* builds a table of every possible behavior in the game. Then it excludes behaviors that are not currently eligible (for example, a character would not lie down in a hammock outside if it were raining). Next it assigns a likelihood factor to every remaining eligible behavior. That likelihood can be manipulated, of course, either by the player directly (by praising and scolding the little people) or as a consequence of hidden personality traits.

The fun part here is you can essentially prohibit certain behaviors through praising and scolding, and other intrinsically rare behaviors can be nurtured and encouraged. Additionally our system gives the little people a nice level of autonomy. If they get hungry, they start to hang out in the kitchen. If they need to pee, they will go do it and not need to be micromanaged at that level. If they are depressed they will gravitate toward passive activities like watching TV.

- ***Framework and Technical Reuse***

In a casual games market with declining per-unit revenues (and probably declining overall revenues), it has become even more important to make full use of available technical resources. We were able to use almost every aspect of the base *Virtual Villagers* framework to shorten the already lengthy development cycle for this game. We reused terrain management, pathing, the casual game basics (buttons, help screens, about screens, etc,), sound and music management, and DRM, which saved us both money and QA time—especially since many of these elements have been refined and made robust over the course of generations of games. In fact, it becomes a very real consideration when starting any new game design: How much of this can be reused on future projects?

- ***Room for Two?***

Dean Takahashi wrote about *Virtual Families* in his blog VentureBeat. His reflections on the audacity of a husband-and-wife studio apparently taking on EA were amusing and encouraging.

Later, after launch, he noted that perhaps being the second-best at serving a demographic is a perfectly viable model. We found this interesting. Certainly in the world of family simulators we are a distant number two to *The Sims;* but we don't consider ourselves primarily serving the same demographic because of our distribution, the price point, and the hardware requirements. The people who we reach with *Virtual Families* tend to not be the same players who enjoy *The Sims,* but we still attract many rabid fans of our game. The crumbs left by the enormous giant that is EA are plentiful and abundant.

What Went Wrong

- ***Art Style***

We set out to create the game in a contemporary setting. Originally we wanted to create a sort of utopian family, like from the Norman Rockwell paintings. But we realized that the Rockwell look is just retro enough to be inconsistent with the computers that we needed to be available in the virtual house. Computers are a central part of the game in that the little people use them to communicate with the player. The little people also use computers to date and marry and prosper in a wider variety of stay-at-home careers. We didn't make the change to a more modern contemporary style until midway through the game development, but in some

The Making of Virtual Families

A Virtual-Life Postmortem

ways it was too late. The art team had to adapt, roughs were redone or abandoned, and even in the end we see elements that remind us of the original vision and create some inconsistency.

- ***The Mother of All Feature Creep***

Try creating a life simulation. Any life simulation. The design for this type of game is a very slippery slope because the ideas that fit the game are *endless*. Not just the number of ideas but the quality of ideas—*everything* fits into a life simulation. So it becomes extremely challenging to know when to stop adding "important" features. One example: Due to popular demand we finally succumbed and added house pets to the game. Immediately we were getting negative feedback that the pets' AI was insufficient: they could not produce offspring of their own, and they were not trainable. There was never an easy point in the design where we could limit the implementation without receiving negative feedback regarding those features which lay just outside the scope.

- ***Lengthy Development Cycle***

A combination of factors on this project resulted in a longer development cycle than we expected or desired. We intended to complete the game in eight months, but it took closer to 11 months. We probably could have kept things on track with less art revisions, stricter design limits, and less lofty goals in terms of game-play and narrative emergence (notoriously difficult to tune and QA). The timing was also poor because our prolonged development took place in the midst of the casual games price-wars of early 2009. As a result, just as teams were buckling down and trying to keep dev costs low to match the new price and revenue compression, we were headed the other way.

- ***The Sims***

In spite of our confidence that *Virtual Families* was in no way a clone of *The Sims,* EA casts a large and dark shadow. Maybe people were simply not able to separate our family simulation from their family simulation. It may also make it worse that there are so *few* family simulations on the market. When a new match-three is released it is never accused of being unoriginal, but instead attention is focused on whatever differences and differentiation can be found. The harshest resistance came from hardcore fans of *The Sims* (both professional critics and players) who could not get past the similarity of theme. Although most of our hit games have received negative

Everything fits into a life simulation. So it becomes extremely challenging to know when to stop adding "important" features.

reviews, this game's launch was met with the most polarized reviews we had ever seen (one-star and five-star ratings from reviewers and players alike). It is undeniable that the game received some of the worst critical reviews we have ever experienced, matched with the absolute highest conversion and revenue numbers we have ever seen for a new IP. Sales remain strong six months later, as there is no real alternative in the casual market for players who are craving a true family-life simulation.

- ***Emergence***

The same emergence that gives the game such a unique and varied player-experience also makes it very difficult to tune the game and produce reliable, consistently believable game scenarios. We look at emergent content versus pre-rendered content as an important lever in each of our game designs. The more you push that level towards pre-rendered, the more perfect and polished you can make the game experience—but at the cost of variety and replay-ability. *Virtual Families* will sometimes throw you a weird emergent scenario that would never make it through QA in some casual games. For example, you would never pre-render a Cake Designer whose personality traits include "hates food." Because of our commitment to emergent game-play, some of the scenarios that players have experienced are several steps beyond quirky and start to strain the believability of the virtual world.

Conclusion

When you create an innovative game, you have to expect resistance in a few places. The gatekeepers of distribution (which is to say, the decision-makers at the portals) are used to certain types of games, and will often balk at something that is very unusual—especially if it comes from a team with a limited track record, as ours was at the time. The next resistance that we have learned to expect comes from reviewers. We have experienced mixed reviews with every new game that we have launched, but we experienced this to an even higher degree with *Virtual Families*. To reconcile the very mixed (user and critical) reviews with the extremely good sales numbers, we came up with the following theory. If you're playing a match-three (or other well-established genre) and do not enjoy it, you will move on quickly to another. This is especially true for downloadable games in well-established genres. If, on the other hand, you try our family simulation and do not like it, or if you're bothered by the limits we chose in the design, you have no alternative game to move on to. Instead you might get a bit frustrated and post a rant about it. (A personal favorite: "I hated *Virtual Families*, and to be sure I played it for two weeks every day.") Some simply seemed very angry that it was not quite how they wanted it to be, and were probably frustrated that there was no other casual downloadable family simulation to move on to.

The up-side of this equation is the much-sought-after tail. There is no real alternative to a game like *Virtual Families* in the casual market. And since it is not the sort of game that is easy to create, we do not expect a saturation of games in this genre in the near future. The game's launch was very good and it produced a notable splash. Now we are watching the tail and trying to decide whether or not to do a sequel. . . . ■

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www.nevosoft.ru

What Would Walt Do?

Imagining Walt Disney as a Game Developer

By Rick Marazzani

*Rick Marazzani is a 15-year veteran of the mass-market games business. As Director of Content and Programming for the leading games-on-demand service, Exent Technologies, Rick licenses and promotes the best games to delight and entertain audiences. He has worked for and learned from the greatest game companies (Broderbund, Maxis/EA/Pogo, Digital Chocolate, and Hands On Mobile). He has worked with some of multimedia's biggest brands (EA Sports, Hasbro, Mattel) and biggest franchises (*SimCity, The Sims, Monopoly*). As a co-founder of the development studio iQ212, Rick continues to create original game brands across web, mobile, and PC like* Emoticons, Redneck Fishin', Redneck Huntin', *and their new puzzle game* Fours of Nature. *His favorite ride at Disneyland is the Jungle Cruise. He can be reached at rick.marazzani@casualconnect.org*

Walt Disney was a storyteller who pushed the cutting edge of technology. With Walt's folksy sensibility and his innovative spirit, it is easy to imagine him as a game developer today. He embraced technological advances like synchronized film audio, Technicolor, stereophonic sound, television, and audio-animatronics, all to better tell his stories. Games are the logical next step. Casual games bring together everything Walt Disney enjoyed creating: mass-market entertainment, animation, storytelling, interactivity, and technology.

We can learn a lot from Walt Disney, especially if we apply his wisdom to our field of making games. Let's take a few lessons from Walt and see how our games could benefit from them.

Build Upon the Theme

It's all about the story. Walt elevated animation by adding character, plot, and story to the medium's previous mix of gags and comic violence. When his visions moved from film to reality, Walt invented the theme park by fusing stories to the amusement park. Theme and story add immersion and richness to games just as they do to rollercoasters. Games and story work well together, with each driving the other forward.

Just as the themes at Disneyland are carried by all the senses—color palette, pavement texture, smell, and ambient music—Walt would have enveloped his games in themes.

Walt would have thrived mixing animation and storytelling in an interactive setting. Just as the themes at Disneyland are carried by all the senses—color palette, pavement texture, smell, and ambient music—he would have enveloped his games in themes. Every part of a game—graphics, fonts, audio, dialogues, palette, menus, buttons, help text— would be themed to further the story and to help the player suspend disbelief. A glitzy splash screen and a few cartoon panels of story would not have been enough for one of Walt's games.

Find Your Roy

Creating games, or films, is a form of turning dreams into reality. But when it came to financing them, Walt acknowledged that "dreams offer too little collateral." His brother Roy O. Disney had the business acumen to fund Walt's dreams. As a master storyteller, Walt could sell his visions, but it was up to Roy to close the deal. One built a studio, the other built a company. "If it hadn't have been for my brother Roy," Walt once said," I swear I'd have been in jail for bouncing checks. I never knew what was in the bank. Roy kept me on the straight and narrow."

There was a healthy tension between the art and commerce of the Disney productions. Walt resisted financial pressures and pushed for quality, while Roy managed the books and urged efficiency. In one meeting Walt replied to Roy's complaints: "Roy, *we'll* make the pictures, *you* get the money." They would argue, they would yell, but in the end they both delivered on their end of the bargain.

Making games takes money. If you are not your own Roy, then find one—someone you can trust to support your vision, keep you in check, and help fuel your dreams.

Yes, If . . .

When discussing a new idea, it is easy to point out all of the reasons that it might fail, and for every one of those reasons to be right. The tough part is imagining how an idea can succeed. Walt did not want his animators or Imagineers to tell him, "No, because . . . " or, "It won't work." Instead, they discussed problems in terms of "Yes, if. . . ." "No" shuts doors, eliminates possibilities. Creative people thrive in the world of possibilities, and those are enabled with "Yes, if." Can people love a cartoon rodent? Can you make money on the iPhone? Is there a viable alternative to try-and-buy?

Walt did not want his animators or Imagineers to tell him, "No, because . . . " or, "It won't work." Instead, they discussed problems in terms of "Yes, if. . . ."

Will players enjoy a twist to an established game mechanic? Yes, if. . . .

Own Your IP

Have you ever heard of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit? Or seen a kid wearing an Oswald watch or an Oswald hat with big floppy Oswald ears? Probably not. Before Mickey Mouse, Walt created an animated rabbit named Oswald that was a star of short cartoons. The financing and distribution deal for the Oswald cartoons did not allow Walt to retain ownership of the character or the films. At the end of the contract, at the height of Oswald's success, the distributor assumed production of the shorts, leaving Walt without his character, funding, or animation staff.

Your intellectual property is the only real asset you own as a developer. The value of your studio is based largely on the IP you have created and what you can do with it. If you do not own what you create, then you are just another contractor competing against other low bidders to develop a game. Like brands and characters, IP can be nurtured into franchises, and franchises into evergreen revenue. When negotiating publishing deals, don't sell out your rights too cheaply. When designing a new game, plan the future of your game and characters from the outset. Pitch every game by imagining the bigger picture of where it has been and where it is going.

After Oswald, Walt had to rebuild from scratch, and he vowed never again to lose control of his IP. Subsequently, Mickey Mouse was born, and the spin-offs and merchandise built the company we know today.

Keep on Plussing

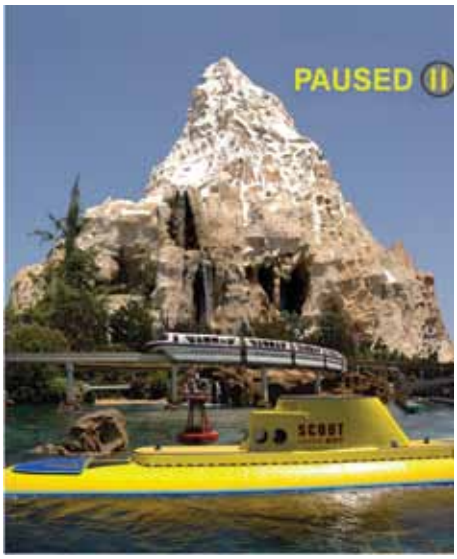
"As long as there is imagination left in the world, Disneyland will never be finished." Walt always pushed his team and himself to improve on their ideas. Even on the day Disneyland opened, he was reviewing, evaluating, and planning how to make it better. He coined the verb "to plus" in an effort to encourage his crew "to plus things up a bit." Sometimes plussing was as drastic as re-drawing an entire scene from a cartoon, or as simple as the prohibition against dusting the interior of the Haunted Mansion.

Plussing is more than a step in development; it is a way of life. It is a commitment to making good ideas better, and to always consider how to improve your work. In game development, this means not shipping simply because you have hit a date on the wall, but rather because the game is rich and polished enough to delight and entertain your audience. Plus as you go, and budget in time to plus at the end of the project, when you are most familiar with it and can see the end result coming together. Surely Walt would have appreciated the fact that in online game development, the game can continue to be plussed even after it launches.

Keep Things Moving

Stand anywhere in Disneyland and look down a street or across a plaza: You will see a mesh of moving shapes and lines, streaming, shifting, surging. Across the park there are thousands of elements that are "animated" to bring every view and scene to life. Crowds, trains, ships, streetcars, flags, banners, balloons, moving sculptures, waterfalls, rides, monorails, parades, fireworks, flickering lanterns—these are just the tip of the Matterhorn (even the Matterhorn is animated with Alpine climbers). The multiple layers of movement make each setting alive and intense.

You might try this approach in your game design as well. A static screen is often a symptom of a crashed game, and causes anxiety in players. A simple solution to alleviate this anxiety is to have every screen active and animated. Special attention should be taken to provide animated feedback to guide and reward the user's interactions. Splash screens and menus should have a glowing radiance and/or shadowing to help them look more clickable. Buttons should change status based on mouse input. Backgrounds become more than mere wallpaper when enhanced with spot animations.



What's Next?

Beyond his own innovations, Walt embraced new and diverse platforms to distribute his content. When the old studios and theater-controlled distributors balked at *True Life Adventure* nature films, Walt and Roy created Buena Vista Distribution. Rather than shy away from television like the major studios did in the 1950s, Walt embraced it and formed production deals with the nascent networks. In fact, his *Disneyland* show for ABC helped finance the creation of the park. Books, comics, records, and now video all spread the Disney content to customers all over the world.

Today, Walt would embrace the changes in game distribution to expand his content and direct relationships. There is value in extending a video game across multiple platforms, to help build the brand and leverage assets. He would tailor the experience for the medium, so that the game-play fit the interface and the quality was optimal for the device. Likewise, your goal should be to build your brand while letting players find your games wherever they prefer to play. In today's changing casual game marketplace, diversified revenue streams are essential to avoiding dramatic downturns. Download, DVD, mobile, streaming, on demand, and console are all ways to deliver content, increase revenue, and build up your game brands.

Walt Disney's legacy as America's greatest storyteller and producer of entertainment lives on. We can only imagine what a casual game would look like in his hands, but no doubt it would be a highly produced fusion of theme, story, and interactive magic. ■

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We can't help ourselves. Occasionally we like to look back in time and figure out what we can learn from what we've done—and we're going to do it again here. It's our way of enabling you to learn something hard the easy way. So pay attention.
– ed.

Game: *Airport Mania: First Flight*

Developer: South Winds Games, Argentina
Publisher: Reflexive Entertainment, Lake Forest, California, USA
Russell Carroll, Designer/Producer

We are always impressed by artists who can help us connect emotionally with ordinary, inanimate objects. What did you do to give the planes believable, human expressions? What other considerations went into ensuring a connection between player and plane?

Carroll: From the beginning, giving the planes a personality was a key focus. In my original (and, I should add, very ugly) mock-up of the game, I used a Microsoft Clip-Art plane with eyes on it. I pasted that image, in multiple colors, all over my one-screen mock-up. That mock-up did a horrible job of showcasing my artistic ability, but it did a great job of illustrating how the planes needed to have personality. It gave us visual focus to what I hoped we'd see when the game was finished.

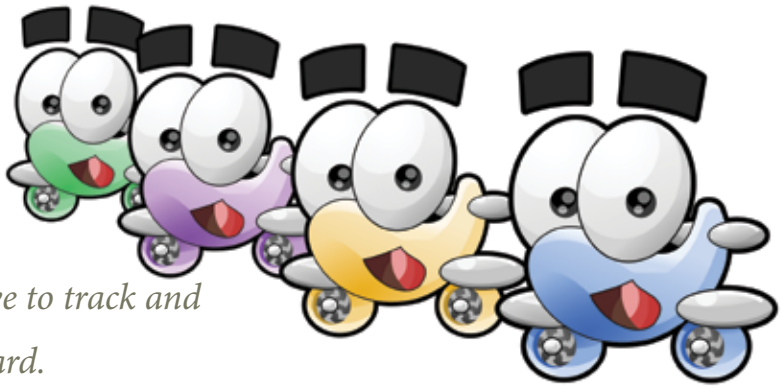
Part of why I'd wanted to work with South Winds Games on *Airport Mania* was that I was sure they could capture the style of what I was envisioning. Their previous game, *Dylo's Adventure,* featured a character that had a lot of charm, and I was sure that Juan Pablo and Gustavo (the programmer and the artist) would be able to capture my vision for the planes—and I was wonderfully pleased with the results. Gustavo created the basic look, and Juan Pablo brought it to life, animating the planes to give them personality. Juan Pablo also did the layout and artistic direction for the stages themselves.

As the game was being created, there actually was some fear that the game was too different from all the other time management games. However, as often is the case, being different ended up being one of the real strengths of the game.

After the look and animation of the planes were done, the planes had personalities, but they were not yet complete. Ion Hardie did an amazing job adding sound that brought the planes to life. Anyone who has played the game can immediately remember the planes' voices. Focusing on a worldwide market, we avoided having the planes use actual words, instead letting the voice itself communicate through intonations. The atmosphere of the game was further set by Isaac Shepard who wrote the music. The "feel" was completed by in-game text that felt friendly and inviting, more like a friend sharing thoughts with you than a teacher telling you what to do.

I mention all the different parts here because the character of the game is defined by both the planes and the world they exist in. The planes are full of personality, and they live in a world that feels personal to the player. It's a world that I hoped would create irrepressible smiles on the faces of those who played the game, and it's been great to see that dream coming true.

Click-management games seem to be a dime a dozen these days. Why did you decide to create a click-management game and how did you ensure that Airport Mania: First Flight *would offer a fresh experience for the consumers?*



Whereas in the typical time management game you control a single character and have that character do things for all of your customers, in Airport Mania you have to track and control multiple characters all over the board.

Carroll: They may be a dime a dozen now, but when *Airport Mania* was first being planned, they certainly weren't. We began developing *Airport Mania* in January of 2007 and released it in April of 2008—a development time of just over 15 months. When we began development, the original *Cake Mania* wasn't yet six months old, and *Sally's Salon* wouldn't be released for another seven months. However, about four months after we started work on *Airport Mania*, time management games started coming out so frequently that I was initially worried. The frequency of releases went from one every month or so to more than one a week, and a couple of times during the process I wondered if we'd started too late!

However, the more games I saw, the less worried I became. With *Airport Mania*, we were taking a very different route than everyone else. For example, unlike all the other games, ours wasn't based on a female character. There wasn't a story about a girl saving her family business or starting her own. In fact the story in *Airport Mania* was the very first thing that got cut after we began development. I was convinced most people skipped the comic-book cut scenes, and that they would distract us from the goal of making the planes the characters. We couldn't have had a story that talked about just one plane—it wouldn't have made sense, and it would have felt tacked on besides.

The multi-character focus was also the key to the game-play. Whereas in the typical time management game you control a single character and have that character do things for all of your customers, in *Airport Mania* you have to track and control multiple characters all over the board. That really gives the game a new dimension of play and complexity. We created a new type of experience in time management games.

However, as much as I was interested in multi-dimensional game-play, my real goal with *Airport Mania* was to make people smile. There were two keys to making that happen. First off, the planes themselves had to make you smile. Secondly, the game-play had to make you feel good about yourself. This second goal was accomplished by having four scoring targets for each level in the game. Instead of just trying to reach "goal" and "expert" like other games, you can reach goal, expert, master, and supreme. This change to how we approached scoring gave players the ability to excel without failure—and the encouragement to do so. I wasn't interested in punishing players or making them replay a level for not doing well. Instead, I wanted to reward them every time they improved. After finishing a level, players would think "I could have done a little better if I'd had this plane go there, and then painted the other one." Instead of thinking, "This is so frustrating, I can't do this!," we had players who said, "I want to try that again because I'm sure I can do better!"

As the game was being created, there actually was some fear that the game was too different from all the other time management games. However, as often is the case, being different ended up being one of the real strengths of the game. Being different made the game stand out from the ever-growing crowd.

One question we get from independent developers is: Where do I start?

Carroll: I think you always start with an idea that you are passionate about, and that you think will be enjoyed by other people. I am still in love with the idea for *Airport Mania*. I originally sketched it out on notepads at my house, and I really wanted to do it—which is a good thing, because between all the different versions I've worked on, the Wii being the latest, I've now been actively working on the game for more than two years straight! If you aren't passionate about what you are making, you can't get that done. Without passion, after six months of development you are so sick of the project that you can't wait to show it the door, and that bleeds through into the game whether you mean it to or not. Passion for what you are developing is the key to unlocking the greatness in your game.

What was your approach to publishing and distribution partnerships?

Carroll: As the game was being released through Reflexive, there wasn't a lot to do in the way of initial distribution. The game was sent to the portals with a specific release date after first being released on our own website. On Reflexive it had a huge opening, quickly climbing to number one. However, to my dismay, it didn't reach the top three on any other major portal in its initial release, and it disappeared from the Top 10 lists on most portals in less than two weeks. I was convinced that the game deserved better, and so I turned my focus to marketing the game.

Honestly, there is enough I could say about the post-release marketing of *Airport Mania* to make for its own article, so I won't tell it all here. To be brief: I focused on getting the game to *more* people than the portals had gotten it to, and to *different* people than the portals had access to. We created a Flash version of the game that increased its sales and awareness around the Web. Then came an iPhone version that went to number one in more than 10 different countries, including the UK and Canada. People were playing and loving the iPhone version all over the world, and that increase in awareness took the PC and Mac games back to number one on Reflexive a full year after their original releases!

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The additional focus on post-release marketing of *Airport Mania* took it from being a middle-of-the-pack success to becoming a huge success—and the sales continue to grow! It's been really awe-inspiring to me, and it has made me realize just how much success in the industry is based on putting in extra effort and believing in the games you are making.

If you make a game that you really love and that you are sure other people will love, you have to stay with it until you find a way to reach the right market. The casual game portals are really tiny when it comes to their access to the general public. If you limit yourself to only releasing on the portals and letting them control your destiny, you can only blame yourself if your game fails to be as successful as you believe it can be.

Game: *Farm Frenzy 3*

Developer: Alawar Melesta
Publisher: Alawar Entertainment

Alexey Meleshkevich, Studio Director, Alawar Melesta
Kirill Plotnikov, Producer and Vice-President of Publishing, Alawar Entertainment
Maxim Mehealis, Art Director, Alawar Entertainment

How did it all begin? How did you come up with the idea of creating a farmyard setting for your business simulator? Was it a conscious decision or an accident?

Meleshkevich: The story of *Farm Frenzy* began when I met Kirill Plotnikov, Vice President of Publishing for Alawar Entertainment. Everything happened at the Casual Connect Kyiv conference in 2007. Having chatted for several hours, we decided to create a game in the time management genre, which was just becoming popular at the time. The business simulator, *Chicken Chase,* became our source of inspiration.

We varied the setting, introduced new animals to the game-play, and made the trading system more complicated so the player could be involved in producing new products (such as powdered eggs, cakes and milk). We replaced the grain the chicks ate in *Chicken Chase* with grass, which became the food for all of the inhabitants of the farmyard. It's hard to say when the bears falling from the sky appeared, but they became one of the most important components of our game and differentiated it from other business simulators. We wanted to make *Farm Frenzy* really entertaining, and somehow we worked it out.

In the sequel, our game designers hid a few gags. No doubt *Farm Frenzy* fans noticed the piglet with a violin and other "experimental" animals. The important thing was to not venture too far into the absurd! The game-play had to remain straightforward.

What new features did you introduce in the sequels to* Farm Frenzy*? In particular, how does* Farm Frenzy 3 *differ from its predecessors?

Meleshkevich: We didn't include all of our ideas in the first game; we saved several features for future installments. For the original *Farm Frenzy*, we had planned to have an incubator—to bring up the chicks independently instead of buying them at the market—but had to put the idea on hold. We revisited it two years later when we were working on *Farm Frenzy 3*. The incubator transformed the game-play in this series, making it more fast-paced and dynamic.

We spent a lot of time rendering new buildings as we wanted to make the production as a whole more vivid and its images livelier than previous installments.

As for lessons we've learned from our work, *Farm Frenzy 3* taught us a lot. Such a massive project required twice the effort as well as knowledge of how to coordinate our activities in advance and work as a team rather than as individuals. For example, we greatly expanded the geography of the game. Ideas for five continents quickly broke out: beyond the polar belt, Eastern Europe, Africa and North and South America. Our work wasn't easy, but it was interesting. We had to solve several problems at once as we invented a unique look for each culture and designed the new animals, including Peruvian llamas, penguins, walruses, turkeys and other funny creatures. In addition, instead of using just brown bears, each location was to have its own predators, including jaguars, lions and grizzlies. Our artists tried to make the design of each one unique and memorable. But it was working on the appearance of the heroine, Scarlett, that gave us the most difficulty.

In-process and final versions of Scarlett

Why did you decide to introduce a heroine in* Farm Frenzy 3*?

Plotnikov: To be honest, the setting for the first two parts of the series and the *Pizza Party* add-on was quite bland. All of the action took place on a grass plot in which supplies and bears came crashing down. With the third game, however, we felt that to maintain the user's interest in the game we needed to tell a cohesive story and develop a central character.

Our writers envisioned Scarlett coming to the aid of farmers in different parts of the world and supporting them in their battles for farmers' rights. In essence, it's a genuine success story. Like Erin Brockovich, our heroine conquers everything on her own and is afraid of nothing. The most

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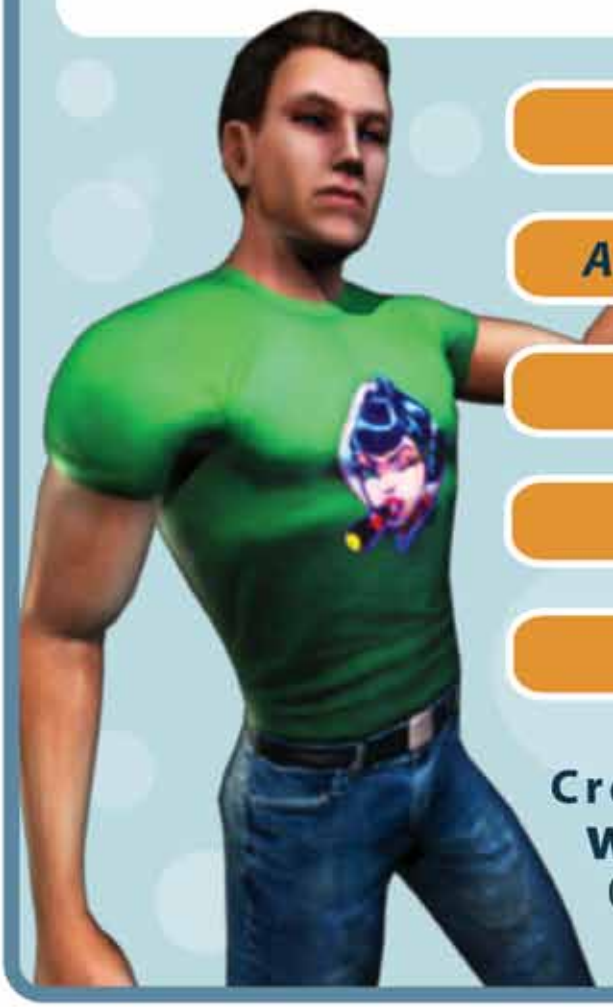

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important thing to her is justice. For the sake of justice, Scarlett will undertake any difficult task. She is involved in an election, the aim of which is to become the president of F.U.N. (Farmers' Union Nod). To accomplish her goal, Scarlett needs the votes of her electorate, and there's only one way to get them: by earning the support of farmers worldwide.

With the help of the plot, we were able to explain the motives behind the heroine's actions and link together several episodes. Scarlett's personality develops in stages, from sequence to sequence, and in the end, we have a confident woman who's ready to take on any challenge. I think the character of Scarlett really appeals to our female players, and I'm sure they'll enjoy seeing her again in our future games, including a casual adventure that takes place in the *Farm Frenzy* universe.

What was your source of inspiration when designing Scarlett?

Mehealis: Working on Scarlett's appearance gave our artists the most problems. You'd have thought nothing could be easier—draw a typical girl from rural America. We had many sources of inspiration, including the cowgirl Jessie from *Toy Story 2,* but we weren't looking for easy options; we wanted to invent our own Scarlett, who was unlike any other girl from an American farm.

While developing the character, we created five versions of her appearance. Initially, she was your ideal storybook beauty, with thin lips and a proud smile. Bit by bit, from one version to the next, the Scarlett you know took shape. Her beauty isn't absolute, but she does possess a special charm, and every fiber of her being glows from within. Her face might look rustic, but this is the effect we were trying to achieve. Scarlett's figure might not be ideal, but as we see it, that's how a country girl who's grown up on horseback would look.

How have you managed to maintain consistency from game to game while still providing interesting new design variations?

Mehealis: From the beginning, we had the unique squiggly font for the game title and the logo with an animal in the center. It evolved from series to series, but the concept overall has remained unchanged. Because of this, the *Farm Frenzy* logo is easy to spot on websites, and it's almost impossible to confuse the game with other business simulators.

In *Farm Frenzy 3,* each of the five geographical locations has its own local color. But if we had created all-new buildings for each part of the world, the work would have stretched on for a very long time. To avoid this, we created groups of buildings and differentiated one from another by altering their color scheme. We also externalized and animated the building's production process so users could easily tell which kind of product the building produced.

Of course, we all had our fair share of worries, from balancing the game-play to working on the character of Scarlett. We spent a lot of time rendering new buildings, too, as we wanted to make the production as a whole more vivid and its images livelier than previous installments. Now it's time for us to set even higher goals as we start thinking about future games starring Scarlett.

Game: *Romance of Rome*

Developer: Awem Studio
Publisher: Awem Studio

Oleg Rogovenko, Founder and CEO of Awem

With so many hidden object games on the market, what did you do to differentiate your game from the competition?

Rogovenko: Because Awem doesn't make "ordinary" games, we knew the game had to involve more than just clicking around. After discussing two different concepts, we collected all successful ideas and defined a setting. Due largely to the popularity of *Cradle of Rome*—and with the substantial help of our online community—we determined that our new hidden object game would be set in Rome.

At that point, we reviewed our assets:

- A fine setting, popular with most and familiar to all
- A nice concept
- An enthusiastic team

Meanwhile, programmers were busy with a new engine which could meet all the game's requirements; our artists were working on the first locations; and the project lead had begun turning the concept into a full-fledged design document. The work was in full swing.

Did you encounter any serious challenges or obstacles along the way?

Rogovenko: At the initial stage of development, our requirements were so high that both programmers got seriously stuck building the engine. But we did not lose our resolve. The forced delay gave us the chance to work out the design document and get rid of dubious features at an early stage.

When at last the programmers could show some meaningful results, the graphics were also ready. What that meant is that we now had built enough that we could share our work-in-progress with a focus group. Its response was: "OK." Of course, we were not at all happy with "OK."

We had built enough that we could share our work-in-progress with a focus group. Its response was: "OK." Of course, we were not at all happy with "OK."

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So what did you do to make sure your game was better than just "OK"?

Rogovenko: To improve our game, we decided to add more characters, enliven dialogue, expand the storyline, and (most important of all) introduce trading relationships and a market. Henceforth, as players found hidden objects they would earn coins which could be spent at the market. As they acquired more, their possessions would be displayed in their profiles. In addition, we decided to provide players with useable tools—an idea that received an enthusiastic response from our focus group.

Of course, all of these innovations compelled us to make changes to the interface—and as we did so, the interface became heavier and more complicated. Eventually, having experimented with numerous interface variations, we settled on the design you can see in the game today.

Give us a brief summary of the steps you took from initial design to gold master candidate.

Rogovenko: Little by little we refined our first demo version of the game and took it with us to Casual Connect Kyiv 2008. Despite the fact that the demo was a bit raw, we received warm and positive responses there, which boosted our enthusiasm for the project. What's more, at the conference we received some valuable suggestions for improvements which we subsequently incorporated into the game.

After the trade show, we found ourselves snowed under with work—but to be honest, we faced it with pleasure. The release was at hand, after all, and we looked forward to our approaching holiday with eager anticipation.

The beta version of *Romance of Rome* was ready in March, but it completely failed initial testing. At that time, we made the difficult decision to make wholesale improvements to the game—even if it meant we would have to postpone the release date for several months.

For starters, we rewrote the plot to make it more extensive while giving the heroes unique, recognizable characteristics. We also made the game more "grown-up" and serious (which didn't deprive it of its humor and charm). We replaced straight blocks of text with bright and stylish comics. And perhaps most significant of all: We got rid of the market altogether even though it had taken central place in the previous version of the game.

Finally, after one-and-a-half years and two different budget increases—and in spite of numerous difficulties along the way—*Romance of Rome* was finally released September 1, 2009. ■

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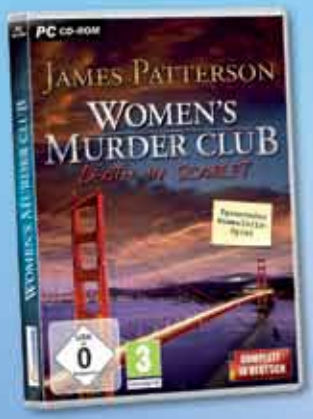

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Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are

The Secret To Creating a Great Hidden Object Game

By Craig Brannon

Craig Brannon, Ph.D., is Vice President of Development at Legacy Interactive. Craig has been involved in game industry for over 15 years, having designed and produced more than 30 published games. He oversees multiple production teams at Legacy Interactive and continues to be very much involved in all aspects of game design and content creation in all of Legacy's PC and console games. He has a proven track record in producing entertaining titles from well-known existing licenses (such as Law & Order, CSI: New York *and* The Lost Cases of Sherlock Holmes*). He also guided the creation of Legacy's original IPs (such as* Emergency Room, Pet Pals *and* Zoo Vet*). Dr. Brannon earned his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. He can be reached at craig.brannon@casualconnect.org*

When the first *Mystery Case Files* game was released in 2005, few would have predicted that the genre would grow to become such a dominant force in casual games. With a new hidden object game released on a seemingly daily basis, that segment of the video game market has become more crowded than ever. But that's a good thing. In fact, the hidden object phenomenon has finally evolved so far that we can now see trends developing. Let's take a closer look at the successful (and not so successful) hidden object games to see which trends future games should strive to follow—and which pitfalls they should seek to avoid.

Play Fair

Great hidden object games—and great video games in general—provide users with an experience that's fun, not frustrating. Because the core game-play mechanic revolves around identifying objects, a clear and crisp art style can help aid users in their recognition of items. Interesting lighting and shadows are key elements in games with stunning visuals. However, hiding objects in areas that are too dark is a mistake that will likely aggravate many players. Items should be cleverly hidden in scenes, but not unfairly so. An object's defining features should be mostly visible (such as a teapot's spout, for example). If only a very small portion of an item is visible, players will likely consider that the placement is unfairly difficult. Placing objects near or on other items that have similar shapes and colors are good ways to help camouflage objects without obscuring them from view entirely.

The best hidden object environments visually tell a story with every scene, enabling players to quickly get a sense of what happened at the scene or what type of characters inhabit the location.

Design Tip: The goal in object placement is to provide some level of challenge to players, in hopes that once they find an object, they say to themselves "Oh yes, I should have found that earlier" and not, "How in the world was I supposed to find that?"

Cater To Higher Expectations

Early on, almost every game that implemented hidden object game-play was commercially successful. But as time has passed, players of such games have become more discriminating, and expectations are higher. A hidden object game can no longer expect to be successful simply by "throwing together" a series of scenes that appear random and disorganized. The best hidden object environments visually tell a story with every scene, enabling players to quickly get a sense of what happened at the scene or what type of characters inhabit the location. Fortunately, developers seem to be getting more savvy along with their audiences. It has become more common, for instance, to see hidden object scenes that contain objects that obey the laws of gravity and are appropriately scaled.

Design Tip: Make sure you select items for a scene that are appropriate for that location.

A common source of frustration for hidden object players is selecting an item in a given scene that would appear to satisfy something in the search list, but does not. This can happen if an item that's part of the background is the same as one of the objects to be found. The wording of items in the search list should be scrutinized to avoid text that is imprecise or too ambiguous. This is especially important for developers who create games in multiple languages.

Take a Hint

Having a hint feature in a hidden object game is essential. Many games allow players only a limited number of hints for each scene. Another hint mechanic allows players to ask for an unlimited amount of hints, but players must usually wait a certain amount of time before they can ask for more help. Whatever hint mechanism is implemented, it is important that the hint provide enough information for players to find an object they were not previously able to locate.

Design Tip: Many hidden object games have both timed and un-timed modes. Although some players enjoy the challenge of having to complete tasks within a limited amount of time, other players do not want the time limitation. If a timer feature is present in the game, it's important to allow players the chance to opt out of using the timer by offering a "relaxed" mode. When a timer is present, there needs to be an adequate amount of time for most players to complete the level.

Here's the Story

Theme and storylines are important components of a successful hidden object game. The best themes and stories are those in which there is inherently something that needs to be solved to justify the player's progression through the game. In general, overly dark or violent themes do not resonate with this audience. Just like any good story in other media, a hidden object game's plot should have surprising twists and a satisfying conclusion. Careful consideration should be given to how the ending of the game will be perceived. A common complaint from players is that the ending of a game seems abrupt.

"Cut scenes" are the traditional means used to advance a game's storyline. Static comic panels were once the norm for cut scenes in casual games, but that is no longer the case today. It is now common for casual games to contain cut scenes with more cinematic elements, including interesting camera moves, animation, and voice-overs. Cut scenes should be brief since many players can become antsy for game-play while watching even high-quality cinematics. An option should always be given for players to skip cut scenes, if desired.

Good mini-games can help define a hidden object game. Players appreciate games that contain different types of mini-games, especially mini-games that seem novel. Combining mini-game genres or adding twists to tried-and-true mini-games are some ways this can be achieved. In many respects, mini-games and puzzles in hidden object games are becoming similar to those encountered in traditional adventure games. As the trend continues to make mini-games more challenging for the increasingly savvy hidden object audience, allowing players to skip mini-games is even more important so that even novice players can avoid feeling stuck.

Design Tip: Mini-games should be purposeful and relevant to the storyline in the game, and not simply offered up as a diversion between levels.

Making a Strong First Impression

Most successful casual games have a certain amount of polish that helps them stand out in this crowded field. Interesting particle effects, ambient animations and sound effects, high-quality music, smooth transitions, and other special effects are all aspects that may go unnoticed individually, but can collectively enhance a user's overall game-playing experience. Typographical errors, wooden voice-over acting, haphazard environments, and the like are all characteristics of games that may seem "rushed to market" and therefore not worth a player's time or money. Putting a game through beta testing is a helpful way to solicit feedback about what areas in your game should be addressed before it is released.

In the "try before you buy" purchasing model, the first hour of game-play for the customer is critically important. It is a good idea to convey the "big picture" of the game to players so that they will be motivated to purchase the game to see what comes next. Having a map that shows the universe of locations in the game can be an effective means in achieving this goal. Including unlockable features and content can also help entice customers to purchase the game. Elements that encourage replayability (such as an evaluation of a player's performance and randomized content) can also motivate players. Be sure to include a well-implemented tutorial that will allow even complete novices to have a positive experience learning game-play features and user interface.

Looking Forward

By analyzing the features of the most successful hidden object games, we can start to see that higher-quality graphics, more cinematic cut scenes, deeper and better-integrated storylines, and novel, story-appropriate mini-games are all features that are becoming more and more common. Inventory-based games and associated puzzles are also becoming commonplace in successful games—they've even spawned the "light adventure" subcategory of casual games. These trends are likely to continue as the hidden object audience grows and matures and becomes more demanding. It is natural then, that successful hidden object games in the future will share even more qualities of traditional adventure games. ■

The best themes and stories are those in which there is inherently something that needs to be solved to justify the player's progression through the game.

Get in the Game

Making Advertising an Effective Part of Casual Gaming

By Lauren Weinberg and J. Alison Bryant, Ph.D.

Lauren Weinberg is Senior Director of Digital Ad Sales Research for MTV Networks. In her role, Weinberg is responsible for digital insight initiatives designed to help MTV Networks create more meaningful connections between its advertising partners and fans. This includes overseeing MTVN's panel and community of 15,000 fans, testing of new and existing video and gaming ad models, and various other insight initiatives that span the entire MTVN Digital portfolio. Prior to joining MTV Networks, Weinberg spent three years at Advertising.com as Director of Research and worked at Nielsen NetRatings and comScore Media Metrix as a Media Analyst. She can be reached at Lauren.Weinberg@mtvstaff.com

Dr. J. Alison Bryant is Chief Strategic Know-It-All at Smarty Pants, a youth and family research and strategy firm. Prior to joining Smarty Pants, Dr. Bryant was Senior Research Director of Digital Research and Brand & Consumer Insights for the Nickelodeon/MTV Networks Kids & Family Group. Before joining Nickelodeon she was an assistant professor of Telecommunications at Indiana University. Her Ph.D. is from the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California. She has published and presented extensively on media, kids and families, including two edited books: The Children's Television Community *and* Television and the American Family *(2nd Ed). She is also Associate Editor for the* Journal of Children & Media. *Dr. Bryant can be reached at ABryant@asksmartypants.com*

At MTV Networks, our hallmark is knowing how to reach our audiences, whether it's on TV, online, in games, or with advertising. We know that all consumers play games online—from kids to grandparents—but that they often play for different reasons and with different motivations. For moms it's "me time;" for dads, a chance to recharge; and for teens, an escape from reality. And we target these demographics on a variety of gaming platforms, including casual gaming brands like AddictingGames and Shockwave.

In an effort to measure advertising effectiveness, we have conducted numerous studies about in-game marketing executions and advertisements placed around online games. We've seen the positive results and touted success to our partners, but we have had to depend on self-reported data to answer some of the key questions regarding what makes online gaming such a compelling space from a marketing and consumer standpoint. So we wanted to take our understanding of the relationship between an engaging game and an effective ad one step further—to understand how we could create smarter advertising experiences in and around games. We were wading into uncharted territory, so we decided to throw our research playbook out the window and approach this question with a new set of theoretical and methodological tools. In the end, our groundbreaking biometric research not only changed the game from a research standpoint, but it also taught us a great deal about what works—*and why*—in the world of gaming and advertising.

Our groundbreaking biometric research not only changed the game from a research standpoint, but it also taught us a great deal about what works—and why—*in the world of gaming and advertising.*

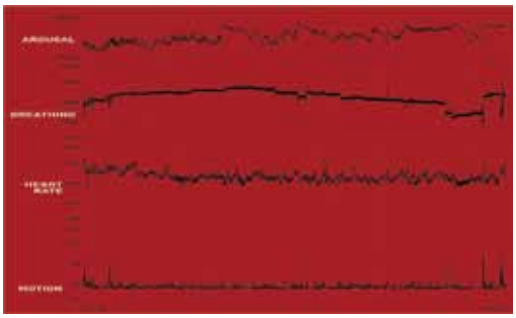
Changing the Research Game

The first order of business for this research was to find partners who were doing truly innovative things in this space—which is why we turned to Innerscope Research (www.innerscoperesearch.com) and The V.E.R.T. Group (www.thevertgroup.com). We set up a rigorous study to measure how people emotionally and cognitively react to the experience of gaming and the messages of advertising. The biometric responses we gathered included heart rate, hand perspiration, body movement, and respiratory rates, which were combined with eye-tracking and pupillary response. All of these metrics combined to tell a complete story about how users connect with the games they play—as well as when their minds are most ripe for processing brand messaging.

When it comes to casual games, there is clearly a wide range of game types and play patterns. There are also a variety of ways to integrate messages into the games. In order to address these issues, we focused on two very general types of games: cognitive games (games requiring mental focus and reasoning) and action games (games revolving around motion). We also looked at three forms of messaging within the game experience: banner ads, pre-roll video, and advergames. By studying the various responses of a game player before, during, and after game-play in these categories, we were able to understand the optimal advertising experiences to capture our fans' connection with the gaming content. As we found, if you combine the right ad package with the right game type, you make both the advertisement and the game more engaging.

The Five Pillars of Successful In-game Marketing

Although we collected an enormous amount of data which led to a wide range of findings—some hypothesized and some unexpected—in the end we identified five keys to integrating messages into the games themselves:



1. Play Mind Games

When you want to integrate your message within a game, it is critical to be where the player is already processing information. Succinctly put, advergames are more effective if they are cognitive in nature. If your consumer is already thinking during game-play, the messages are easier for them to "absorb."

2. Target Areas of Focused Attention

There is a critical threshold for how long you want a consumer to look at your brand within a game:15 seconds. Once that threshold has been reached, the effectiveness of your brand messaging skyrockets. This also means that you have to design your advergames keeping in mind where your players will be focusing their attention. If there is an area where there will be more attention, make sure to place your brand there. For example, if you have a racing game in which your player will be spending most of the game looking at the rear end of the car, put your brand on the rear window, the trunk, or the back bumper.

3. Integrate with the Game Brain

In addition to the game itself, there are other parts of the game experience that offer high cognitive processing, and are therefore places that are great for integrating your brand messages. The three most effective places are the loading screen, the menu screen, and the final reward screen. In each of these cases, the game player is actually paying close attention to what's happening on the screen. Therefore, these are opportunities for you to integrate your brand. One approach would be to offer some sort of interactive engagement—such as a mini-game in the loading screen, for instance. Another alternative would be to employ a more static approach—like a contextually relevant "congrats" message featuring your brand on the final reward screen.

4. Make the Brand Central to the Action

If you are going to integrate a brand into the game, make sure that it is part of the action of the game, and not in the periphery. This could mean that the product itself is actually part of the game-play, or it could mean that the advertising on the page is somehow made relevant to the game. For example, you could sponsor the scoreboard of a game, because you know that players will be constantly looking at that space to get feedback on their performance. (This strategy also ties in to Pillar #2 above.)

5. Make the Experience Better

Finally, gaming is a satisfying experience because it offers a challenge that consumers can master in order to obtain a sense of accomplishment. The trick, of course, is to make the game challenging but not frustrating. This has two implications. First, don't make your advergames too difficult. When the players get frustrated, they start to pay less attention, which in turn makes them process less information, which in turn makes your message less effective. Second, if there are points in the game-play that you know are going to be more challenging, incorporate non-obtrusive, positive, reinforcing messages (with your brand integrated into them) for the player. Players are more open to messages when they are feeling positive, so you want to make sure those messages are delivered to them in that "happy place." ■

The Three Things You Have to Know about Pre-Roll Video

Our research also taught us some valuable lessons regarding pre-roll video.

1. *Focus on Action Games*

Video pre-rolls are significantly more effective when they are placed in front of action (rather than cognitive) games. The mental processing required to watch a video ad is very different from that which is required to play an action game. In contrast, processing a video ad and playing a cognitive game require similar mental processing. What that means is that an action game does a better job of supporting a video advertisement because the game-play doesn't "override" the advertising message. Conversely, when players have to think hard in a cognitive game, they are more likely to displace whatever message they may have received from the ad in the pre-roll.

2. *Shorter is Better*

There is a (seemingly) never-ending debate in the online world about the relative merits and effectiveness of 15- vs. 30-second pre-rolls. When it comes to putting video ads before games, we've now got your answer—go shorter! When videos stretch on past 15 seconds, players—who are anxious to get to their game—start to get frustrated and lose attention. This lost attention and frustration correlates with lower effectiveness for those longer ads. So keep it short and sweet!

3. *Drive Synergy*

When a video pre-roll is contextually relevant to the game—that is, when it is about similar product categories or when it shows similar action—it not only makes the ad more effective, but it makes the game more enjoyable as well. For example, running an ad for McDonald's before an (unbranded) *Burger Shop* game increases the engagement with both. This finding greatly opens up the possibilities for matching all of those unbranded games out there with potential advertising partners. ■

How to Build a Brand

Creating Strong Franchises in a "New Game Every Day" Industry

By Dasha Kobzeva

Dasha Kobzeva is a Marketing and PR Manager at Playrix Entertainment where she is primarily responsible for the development of the Playrix brand in the media and entertainment industry as well as for all marketing initiatives. She holds a degree with honors in English and German languages and also completed coursework in International Relations and Marketing at Champlain College, VT, USA. She can be reached at dasha.kobzeva@casualconnect.org.

At the dawn of the gaming industry, the majority of developers were absorbed with the necessity of getting their games out on big portals. Today, however, there are new products introduced every day. It isn't enough to just build another game to add to the myriad that already flood the market—you must also create a solid brand. This may not seem like an eye-opener. However, with so much product and platform proliferation (including retail, console, and handhelds), establishing a strong brand on a variety of platforms is the only way to ensure its longevity.

Brand exists only within the minds of people as a combination of their expectations and feelings. Disregarding this vital component can be a big mistake in the long run. Here are a few things that you should keep in mind while wrapping your head around the concept of building solid brands:

- *FAQ: Fun, Analysis, Quality*

It goes without saying that high quality and fun content are the core values a game needs in order to grow into a solid title. But to build a strong brand, one must also analyze the market, figure out what players want, and be responsive to their needs. Thinking ahead and planning from the very beginning for franchises and localizations can create the opportunity for sequels and spin-offs down the road.

- *Name It Right*

The wrong name can ruin the chances of a game to succeed. If the name is too long, for example, or too hard to pronounce or spell, players will have a hard time remembering it and searching for it on the Internet. That's why choosing the right name for your game is so important—and challenging. Brainstorming, searching the Web for trademarks and free domains, asking advice of your beta-testers and native speakers—any number of methods may prove successful. It's great to have a person with the linguistic background on your team to trigger ideas and give you an insight into alliteration, rhythm, word-play and other considerations.

Thinking ahead and planning from the very beginning for franchises and localizations can create the opportunity for sequels and spin-offs down the road.

- *Ready, Set, Buzz*

Don't assume that just because you have built a great game, people will immediately start playing it. Premium quality, innovative mechanics, and a memorable name certainly increase the chances that a game will dominate sales charts and headlines; but without strong marketing and PR, even the best games can fail to gain the exposure necessary to achieve long-term success. You have to tell them about it—and then continue to remind them how great it is.

- *Home, Sweet Home*

The domain of your game can be a hub where passionate fans congregate, a channel for community-building around your brand. Presenting players with regular news updates, ongoing product demos, a constant stream of assets (including videos, screenshots, etc.) and special fan-oriented promotions may seem demanding, but experience shows that it works to generate excitement over a long-term period leading up to and beyond launch. Foster a sense of community and listen to your game-devotees, and soon they will become your biggest brand evangelists. They can spearhead great ideas for sequels and line extensions. For example, at one point *Fishdom* fans asked us whether it was possible to use the money earned on the levels to buy more fish tanks, as there are only three in the original game. Now sequels to *Fishdom* will be sure to have this feature.

- *The Earlier, the Better*

It used to be that pre-launch marketing was only possible within multi-gazillion-dollar campaigns for core games. Now it is equally relevant to the casual games industry. Marketing a casual game is not a budget-breaker—much of it is now free or nearly free. Get the game previewed, spread the word on Twitter and Facebook, make a video and post it on YouTube and other video sharing websites. In other words, take advantage of social media to pave the way for the game in advance.

- *What's Buzzing?*

Keep working on sustaining buzz for your brand even after the game is released. Reviews, interviews, press releases, tweets—any exposure you can generate will help to keep your game afloat. Try to focus on campaigns designed to raise awareness among new communities whose interests might overlap with the initial target audience.

- *Look Around*

It's never too late to learn from the companies outside the casual games industry. Following and learning from successful brands like Pixar, Blizzard, and Apple (to name just a few) is a great way to come up with new ideas and creative approaches to use within your marketing campaigns.

- *Keep on Porting*

Platform proliferation has really crept up on us. A decade ago there were two viable platforms: the PlayStation and the PC. Now there are many. You should strive to deliver the unique experience your game has to offer to the widest possible audience, and the only way to do so is to port it to as many platforms as possible. A multi-platform strategy drives business growth and creates a loyal fan base of consumers worldwide.

- *Work with Passion*

Ultimately, we all do our best work when we truly believe in what we're doing. Perhaps the most important step in building a brand is to work on games you really love. Howard Schultz, Starbuck's CEO, put it this way: "In this ever-changing society, the most powerful and enduring brands are built from the heart. They are real and sustainable. Their foundations are stronger because they are built with the strength of the human spirit, not an ad campaign." ■

Don't assume that just because you have built a great game, people will immediately start playing it. Without strong marketing and PR, even the best games can fail to gain the exposure necessary to achieve long-term success.

Getting Paid Without Getting Played

Managing Payments in Casual Gaming

It's a simple concept: Make a game and have the people who enjoy playing it pay you for the privilege. Everybody wins, right? Theoretically. But there are enough dubious ways for people to avoid paying you for your hard work (and maybe even cost you money in the long run) that we thought perhaps you could use this good advice.

—ed.

By Ryan Friel

Ryan Friel is a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) and graduate of the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce, holding a BS in Finance and International Business. Early in his career, Ryan helped build the Technology Investment Banking practice at BB&T Capital Markets, focusing on eCommerce, Content/New Media, eBusiness Intelligence and eBusiness Services. At Deutsche Telekom, he then served as Assistant Director in Mergers and Acquisitions overseeing due diligence teams across network services and internet access acquisitions for US, Canadian, French and German markets. Ryan later served as Senior Manager of AOL Premium Services, diversifying AOL's revenue streams beyond basic internet access by identifying, launching and monetizing new consumer-oriented digital services. Before joining Litle & Co., Ryan was a founding employee of ARPU Inc., a data-enabled advertising network, where he established the company's advertising partnerships with web- and software-based online services companies. At Litle & Co., Ryan is the market development expert in the broad online services marketplace, including online gaming and casual gaming businesses. He can be reached at rfriel@litle.com.

The casual gaming marketplace underscores the ubiquity of the Web perhaps better than any other category of commerce: More than 200 million players worldwide generated $2.25 billion in revenue in 2007 (according to the CGA). Yet, these data underscore two other realities: 1) the casual gaming universe is ripe for fraud—virtual goods fraud, peer-to-peer fraud and retribution fraud—based simply on the sheer number of players across the globe; and, 2) despite player penetration, revenue generation—at less than $12 per player, remains fairly paltry by any digital commerce standard.

You can begin to address these realities by adhering to a few basic best-practices that any business accepting online, card-not-present transactions should follow. These practices will help you develop the processes and procedures that you need to focus on in the business of gaming (that which you know best), rather than having your time consumed with the business of managing payments and their attendant issues. Implementing these simple recommendations will limit your risk (as you manage the cost of accepting payments) while enabling you to grow your revenue receipts as well.

If players can't contact you with immediate issues, they're more likely to abandon play and to instigate time- and resource-consuming chargebacks.

Presenting Information

We've learned from years' of experience in card processing that if players can't contact you with immediate issues, they're more likely to abandon play and to instigate time- and resource-consuming chargebacks. Therefore, you should clearly display contact information (toll free numbers, player-subscriber service email addresses) on every page of your game's UI, on your marketing website and materials, and on every electronic communication with users. Assuming that players are using payment sources other than prepaid cards associated specifically with your gaming enterprise, you should ensure that any billing descriptors used—most notably for card users—are clear so that when they appear on players' account statements they are entirely descriptive ("Gamers Games—*Multiplayer Monopoly*—888-555-5555—Los Angeles, CA"). In addition, every transaction—every new play, subscription, billing event, and credit—should be communicated with clear electronic confirmation.

Fraud and Chargebacks

Let's be real: Two extreme frustrations in gaming are fraud and chargebacks. Both can result in costly, time-consuming headaches. Unfortunately, the sources of fraud in online gaming are as varied as the solutions to thwart them. Consequently, chasing every solution is likely to add lots of cost without necessarily strengthening your sense of security in kind.

Your payments management partner should be able to lead you in the discovery of fraud solutions that are going to work for you. Combating virtual goods fraud requires one set of solutions; fighting retribution fraud and chargebacks is something entirely different. Ideally, your payments management platform should enable you to eliminate waste, freeing up resources so that you can focus on areas that require non-mainstream solutions, as in handling fraud realities unique to a digital gaming environment.

On the chargebacks front, communicating clearly with your players is an essential first step. In addition, make sure that you understand what chargeback mitigation tools—and expertise—are built into your payments platform. For example, does your payments platform include digital tools

As you seek payment partners, be sure to inquire about their experience in the world of recurring payments. The best platforms have been programmed with logic that almost entirely automates the recurring billing process.

that allow you to upload communications and other documentation to fight chargebacks—without the need for paper or staff to manage the paper? Such solutions ultimately reduce the costs of chargebacks while supporting your ability to win chargeback disputes.

Converting Trial Users

Some simple enhancements to your payment collection practices can help you turn trial users into subscribers or recurring users:

1) Process payments in real-time, not after the fact through batch processing. Doing so enables you to get immediate feedback to your players and let them handle payment issues on the spot.
2) Get ahead of the curve by offering your players the most viable alternative payment options—making sure that these options are the most relevant to your players' needs. In evaluating your alternatives, be sure to assess your needs from a range of perspectives, including cost of acceptance, fraud, etc.

As you seek payment partners, be sure to inquire about their experience in the world of recurring payments. The best platforms have been programmed with logic that almost entirely automates the recurring billing process. Your best solution is one that incorporates similar logic to the process of recycling authorizations in case an initial authorization is unsuccessful. Finally, the most advanced payment platforms are those that incorporate dynamically sophisticated BIN analytics that help you know what type of payment you're accepting so that you don't inadvertently accept a player using an empty prepaid source of payment.

Analytics and Reporting

Using payments data to provide hardcore business-enabling consumer intelligence is still a fairly new practice. In fact, most businesses don't receive data in a format that is easy to understand. To make matters worse, payments data is rarely delivered in a form that can help you lessen the cost of accepting payments or understand revenue growth drivers. The best payments platforms will reflect the most advanced thinking about data analytics. The more progressive the thinking, the easier the reporting interface is to use, the more you are able to advance both cost-mitigation and revenue enhancement opportunities.

Each of these best-practice areas should be more fully explored, but using these as building blocks in your payment acceptance culture will have you spending more time satisfying paying players and less time on problem-causing users that create drag on your revenue growth. ■

Making *Mucho Dinero* Abroad

The Art of Taking Our Business to Other Markets (in the World)

By Luis Ongil

Luis Ongil is CEO of GameDuell USA, a branch of Germany's largest gaming community with over 9 million players, and one of the largest in Europe. Since joining GameDuell, he has helped in the international rollout of the offering, taking direct responsibility for the expansion in Spain, Latin America, the USA, and Canada. Before joining GameDuell, Luis was responsible for the sales operations of Monster.com in the Spanish market, creating the sales structure and strategy from the ground up and positioning Monster.com as one of the main recruitment websites in that competitive market. Previously, Luis was responsible for the launch of the leading European consumer portal, dooyoo.com, in the Spanish market. Luis has also worked as a consultant at Deloitte and McKinsey. He holds Business and Marketing degrees from the University of North Texas (USA), as well as MBA from that same institution. He can be reached at luis.ongil@casualconnect.org.

So much money in the world, so little time to grab it. . . .

As we enter a substantive global era, making money abroad is not just a dream, but an intrinsic part of any online business today; in fact, the casual games industry, with all its global potential and cross-cultural appeal, is making that dream a reality.

As global penetration of the Internet grows (there are almost two billion people online worldwide today), it is now possible to build a viable business at home and roll it out profitably to an international market. This possibility becomes even more important when we look at where the growth is coming from in the next three to five years: in Europe—where there are 350 million people online—less than half the population is on the Web; in Latin America less than 30 percent; and in Asia—with a whopping 700 million people online today—only 17 percent of the population is connected. The potential is huge[1].

We promote our own games on three different continents: Europe, South America, and North America. Let me share some of the lessons we've learned, the successes we've enjoyed, and the (many) mistakes we've made along the way.

Furthermore, when we look at our industry, we see that the potential for growth is even bigger since games are global products—just like movies, music, or books. A good game like *Diner Dash* or *Jungle Jewels* has a legitimate chance to become a hit in the US, China, or Spain. For example, although *Mafia Wars* was originally developed for the North American market, it was an instant success when translated into other languages—and today most of its growth is coming from countries like Spain, France, and Indonesia.

Now, the question is, how in the world do you do it? At GameDuell, we promote our own games on three different continents: Europe, South America and, recently, North America. Let me share some of the lessons we've learned, the successes we've enjoyed, and the (many) mistakes we've made along the way. I encourage you to focus on four areas—Product, Organization, Marketing, and Payment—in order to ensure a scalable business model that allows you to grow with as little pain as possible as you set out to conquer the gaming world.

Product

This is the most important focal point of them all. Product is especially important to game companies that develop games and showcase them in a full website (with free trial versions), just as it is to companies that create communities around games (whether they develop those games themselves or not). So whether your product is a game or a website (or both), make getting the product right your first priority. If the product is not ready to be taken to other markets, any of the other actions and efforts simply will not work—no matter how much money you put into the business. Consequently, your product must be designed for a global market from day one—which means, of course, that you must avoid a merely "local vision" at all costs. One common mistake that can hinder international reach is writing code in a language other than English (the recognized international language) because it will make it harder for people in other countries to use your code when you go international. Likewise, from the get-go you should take into account that your accounting/payment systems must be able to accept clients who have different currencies. And of course you should always design your product with the global user in mind, avoiding characters or mechanisms that won't work in every market.

Remember, you always want to adapt the way you organize your catalog on your website to fit your market. For instance, in North America, gamers want quick access to the game: one click and they should be playing. If they come from a banner into your site, they will expect to find the game right there or no more than one click away. In contrast, Europeans don't mind exploring the site before playing, so placing several pages between the first click and the game is ok (for now—

[1] All data provided by Internet World Stats, 2008

A pair of Jacks: from the U.S. (left) and Germany (right)

although this is quickly changing). You may also want to research graphical preferences, and each player's reaction to them. For example, using the right cards in solitaire is crucial because their style varies from country to country. Use the wrong style and you run the risk of confusing players.

Other things to keep in mind is that American players want less text, more graphics, and briefer explanations, while some Europeans (like Germans, Swedes, and Italians) prefer more text and thorough explanations. Also, lots of flash elements are very popular among French and Spanish players, so dull, more static websites will not work as well in those markets. There are a lot of ways your product can fail in international markets, so plan before executing and things will run more smoothly.

Organization

All right, so now that your product is looking pretty good, it's time to decide how you'll manage this rollout.

There are various options to set up your business in different markets. Although some ideas are better than others, there's no wrong approach. In the end, the decision has to be made based on the level of control you want centralized, and the speed-to-market you desire. If we take into consideration only fully-owned companies (that is, no joint ventures or business partnerships of any kind) there are three very common ways to enter a new market *(see table):*

One simple option is a basic sales representation model in which you hire someone to close marketing deals that bring traffic to your site. Or you might form distribution partnerships to distribute your games in the local market (potentially even handled by a third-party company). Of course, you might choose instead to set up a full subsidiary—with marketing, sales, and even product development—probably located in (or at least near) the targeted market. Another viable solution is to operate with an online presence only with everything handled from your existing headquarters. Companies in an early stage normally will use this option, although it is not uncommon for more developed organizations to work this way as well. (Big Fish Games, for instance, manages most of its European business from their headquarters in Seattle.)

At GameDuell we have developed a centralized mixed organization. Services like product development, technology, and even some support functions are actually run in our Berlin headquarters. Meanwhile, our US division in San Francisco manages the relationship with our customers: legal, customer service, and accounting are all managed by the San Francisco office along with marketing deals and overall market entry strategy. This way we have the ability to stay in touch and conduct business with the local market where it makes sense (North America), while being fast, flexible and centralized in Europe. My advice would be to start out small and centralized so you can be quick on your feet, and then proceed to choose the right structure that makes sense given your company and strategic goals.

Marketing, Strategy, and Business Development

Who has not heard of all those companies, even the big ones, full of those really smart people that made costly marketing mistakes? Chevrolet, for example, spent a lot of time, money, and effort introducing their beautiful Chevy Nova in the Spanish market, just to discover months later that Nova means *it doesn't go* in Spanish. Likewise, Japan's second-largest tourist agency was mystified when it entered English-speaking markets and began receiving requests for unusual sex tours; upon finding out why, the owners of Kinki Nippon Tourist Company had no choice but to reconsider its name.

When you enter a new market, you need to pay extreme attention to your marketing language—not only the obvious issues (like the inadvertent puns mentioned above) but also very specific and detailed points of language that can make or break your business (or cost a lot of money along the way).

Additionally, understand that metrics will vary from country to country. For instance, Brazil, Spain, Mexico, and France have higher click-through rates than the U.S. market, where clicks are very low and there is normally a higher level of Click Fraud (as high as 30 percent in some cases). On the other hand, conversion rates tend to be higher in the U.S. since Americans are often less afraid to try new things.

Also you will need to adapt your advertising creative to suit your audience. U.S. ads are typically more about how the product makes the consumer feel, while Europeans tend to be more interested in the product itself—its qualities or benefits. Similarly, pay attention to the flow on your site. As mentioned before, a European audience doesn't mind exploring, clicking around, and taking the time to understand a site. In the U.S., however, the one-click rule almost always applies. Ignoring this specific user preference is likely to result in a bad user experience that may cause the player to quit, or worse: to never come back! And this is another big difference between the two markets: It is very hard to convince U.S. consumers to try your service or product if they already have had a bad experience with it, whereas in some European and Latin American countries, consumers can be a little more forgiving and give your company a second chance after a bad experience.

Finally, as you develop your business relationships with partners and providers in other countries, keep in mind that we are not all alike. For instance, in Southern Europe, the business cycle is slow and relationship-based. It is very hard to do business with someone there you haven't actually met. In Scandinavia, by contrast, business moves faster. Much of it is transacted via

Company structure allows different choices

	Full Subsidiary	Sales Representation	All Head Quarters
Focus on Local Business	+	0	−
Speed to Market	−	+	+
Investment	+	0	−
Low Break Out Cost	−	+	+
Economies of Scale	−	−	+

Making *Mucho Dinero* Abroad

The Art of Taking Our Business to Other Markets (in the World)

phone or e-mail, without the need for face-to-face meetings. And then there's Germany, where business is conducted in a more formal manner and proposals are thoroughly and frequently revised. Decisions there are almost never based on "gut feeling." (A good friend of mine, CEO of one of the biggest insurance companies in Germany, always tells me that "gut feeling stands for Giving Up Thinking.") Also, when buying services from a U.S. company, often they will expect you to tell them how much you want to spend and what you want to buy. Then they will check to see if this is possible and give you a counteroffer. Meanwhile, in Europe it is the seller who presents the offer and the buyer who gives the counteroffer.

So the big take-away here is adapt your message, your campaigns, your catalog, even how fast your payment system works, to make sure it fits exactly with the market's needs. Lots of A/B testing will help you gauge your audience's behavior, but the sooner you start thinking outside the box, the sooner you'll learn what works best in that particular local market.

Payment

Knowing what to charge and how best to collect it is the final key to success. Some very important issues to take into account:

- Make sure you have an international acquirer—an organization such as Visa or Mastercard which maintains merchant relationships and accepts credit or debit cards across borders. It could happen that your UK or German credit card provider, even though they tell you they are global, does not actually accept (most) debit cards from Spain or France or the U.S. Make sure their license allows them to accept these and that they do it successfully.
- Offer as many payment options as possible. In the U.S., with cards and Paypal you probably have enough. But this is not the case in most countries in Europe and Latin America which have local "paypal" clones, "offline" cards (like Ukash or Paysafe), direct debit, and direct deposit. There are still other, more sophisticated options, like paying via ATM or at the post office. The best way to decide which payment options to offer is to benchmark other sites. One good starting point: online casinos and sport betting sites, which tend to have the best selection and widest options.
- Don't forget Carte Bleue in France, or Debit Card in Spain, or DineroMail in Argentina. . . .
- Make sure you quickly take control of your chargebacks and fraud. Some less-developed markets, including many in Central and South America, have a higher level of payment fraud and chargebacks. Set strong limits at the beginning and strengthen your fraud detection mechanism. If needed, work with fraud detection companies (like Maxmind or Fraudlabs) that will help you increase the security levels of your payment processes as you enter new, untested markets.

Once you have all the basics covered, you may still wonder if all these people really are that different. Well, they are. Understanding those differences will allow you to speed the process of internationalization and improve your rate of success. There are tens, hundreds, probably even thousands of differences in the way business is conducted in various parts of the world. Although there are too many to list here, here is just a small sampling of the differences I've come across while doing business in several countries and continents.

- In Argentina, deep eye contact (sometimes scary deep) is fundamental when negotiating.
- In Brazil, business is another social interaction—so people feature much more prominently in decisions than profit-margins. They'll even ask you really personal questions, so be ready to share!
- Chileans love to touch when they talk business (hand on shoulder, hand on arm).
- In the U.S., it is common for new acquaintances to address each other on a first name basis from the beginning. The speed of business is really fast: intro call, one meeting, and proposal/contract (sometimes even in the meeting). And money talks. Big amounts. When you say to a company, "Can I buy advertising from you?" you might get an automatic e-mail response. But if you call to say, "I have a $1 million budget and want to spend it on your site," the VIP of Sales is likely to fly over to meet you. Use this leverage to your advantage and get a grip on the game fast .
- In Germany, pay attention to the "handshake" rule, which states that you should shake the hand of the most senior person first. In addition, if they set up a meeting five months in advance, by golly, the meeting is set.
- In Spain, don't be surprised if the worst English is spoken by the person making the decision. Nor should you be surprised if several bottles of wine are opened at a business lunch (those Spaniards sure know how to enjoy life!). Ah, and don't even think about doing business in August. (The same might be said for France, Italy, and Portugal as well.)
- In France, business is always conducted on a last-name basis (unless you are invited to move to first names). Negotiations get really passionate as the French love to debate—even long after the agreement is achieved and the deal signed.
- Italians dress to impress (and looks are, many times, as important as what you say). *Never* show a sense of urgency when negotiating (to Italians this is a clear sign of weakness).
- Russians love to negotiate. They are experts at this art. Negotiations become these really long and theatrical experiences in which you try to grind down your opponent. So, every time you give in to something, you must ask for something in return. It's expected. This is how you will win them over.

I could go on for pages. At the end of the day, the key to successful internationalization of your business is to understand your target markets and ensure that your product, your organization, your marketing mix, and your payment processes reflect that understanding. ■

Whether your product is a game or a website (or both), make getting the product right your first priority. If the product is not ready to be taken to other markets, any of the other actions and efforts simply will not work—no matter how much money you put into the business.

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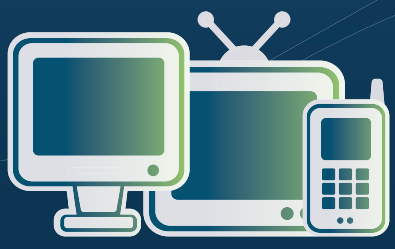

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It's Payback Time

Growing Profits with Mail-in Rebates

We never mind stealing somebody else's good idea—in fact, we kind of enjoy it—especially when it promises to make us an extra buck or two. So when Jason here told us about a new way to make money—applying an old retail trick to casual games—well, we were all over it. You can pay us back later. —ed.

Rebates are a huge worldwide business—representing an estimated $6 billion USD in 2008 alone. To this point, however, rebates exist primarily in the retail environment. For online transactions, coupons have replaced the traditional paper rebate in order to meet the demands of the global online marketplace and to work in an entirely electronic implementation. The problem is that coupons aren't as profitable for manufacturers as mail-in rebates. Fortunately, help is on the way. Services are now available that facilitate the use of mail-in rebates for vendors in the online marketplace.

Facts About Rebates

Rebates are a proven discounting solution for both revenue generation and customer acquisition. For decades manufacturers have used the rebate model (primarily in retail) to provide incentives to customers in the form of discounts. The model works because only around 35% or so of consumers will ever actually redeem the rebate. The actual percentage, of course, is affected by numerous variables:

- As you would expect, consumers redeem higher value rebates at a higher rate than lower value rebates—while many might not bother claiming a $1 rebate, most will take the time to mail-in a $100 rebate. However, some of the statistics are far more surprising.
- A University of Florida study shows that the longer the expiration period on a rebate form, the less likely the consumer is to mail that form in. A short expiration functions essentially as a call-to-action, whereas a longer expiration period gives the consumer enough time to perhaps forget about the form.
- The same study indicates that simpler rebate forms result in fewer redemptions—perhaps the opposite of what one might expect. This phenomenon is likely due to human psychology: A mail-in rebate form with five steps presents a challenge, a kind of task list, and consumers respond by working it as such; conversely, the simpler form may encourage consumers to put off submitting the form for another time, which in turn increases the likelihood that the form will be forgotten.

(For more facts about rebates and their use, visit http://www.RebatesWork.com/.)

The rebate significantly outperforms the coupon because the actual discount is only paid out a small portion of the time—as seldom as 20% of the time.

Rebates Versus Coupons

Coupons, like rebates, generate increased sales by providing consumers with discounted prices on products. Redemption rates for the two discount methods are very different, however. With a coupon, the redemption rate is essentially 100% because the discount is applied immediately at the point of sale. In contrast, with a rebate consumers pay full price and must claim their discount after the fact. Consequently, the rebate significantly outperforms the coupon because the actual discount is only paid out a small portion of the time—as seldom as 20% of the time if good alternative offers are presented to the consumer (more on that below).

Typical Uses of a Rebate

There are many ways to use a mail-in rebate to spur buying, boost sales, and increase profitability. Some typical uses of rebates for online software and game sales would be:

- Steering consumers towards a higher-priced game, product, or bundle.
- Encouraging consumers to opt for a one-year subscription instead of a one-month subscription.
- Enticing consumers to purchase multiple products or games.

By Jason Foodman

Jason Foodman is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of RebateDelivery.com, the first global rebate service for online sales. RebateDelivery operates the consumer portal GetMyRebate.com which includes a robust alternative offer system for vendors to use. Prior to starting RebateDelivery, Jason was co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of SwiftCD.com, providing services to thousands of software and electronic commerce companies worldwide. Jason has a B.S. and M.S. in Computer Science and has formed and invested in numerous technology companies. He can be reached at jason.foodman@casualconnect.org

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Growing Profits with Mail-in Rebates

Alternative Offers

Offering a rebate online gives the vendor options it might not readily have when offering a rebate at retail. Because the "rebate conversation" takes place just as a consumer makes an online purchase, the vendor knows the buyer's identity and has the option of presenting alternative offers. For example, imagine a consumer has qualified for a €10 rebate. On the web page where she is directed to obtain the rebate form, she might be given the option to either print and mail in the form or double her rebate value by accepting a €20 piece of software instead. Other alternatives to collecting the rebate might include discounts, priority support or any other product or service that costs the vendor nothing or significantly less than the rebate value. Studies have shown that consumers who are offered the chance to instantly double or triple their rebate value (rather than mailing in a rebate form) will accept alternative offers as often as 40% of the time. This further increases the "breakage rate," often reducing rebate redemption to as low as 20%. In addition, placing more software into consumers' hands provides the added downstream benefit of potential sales of future versions and upgrades of those alternative products.

Global Rebates

A tricky part of offering a rebate online is dealing with the worldwide buyer pool. It's certainly easy enough to offer a dollar or euro rebate online. However, today services exist that enable vendors to offer true global rebates. This is accomplished by having worldwide mail-in rebate locations which have the ability to pay consumers in their local currency on a global basis. Doing so requires the use of checks, electronic fund transfers, or even a form of debit card.

What's Wrong with Conventional Rebates (and How To Fix Them)

Critical analysis reveals that some of the common tactics and techniques used by the traditional rebate processing firms are counterproductive. Specifically:

- ***Complex rebate forms which result in disqualifying consumers whenever possible.*** This practice leads to unhappy consumers and damaged reputations. A better approach is to do just the opposite: Keep the rebate form as simple as possible (which results in more breakage anyway). With as few as 20% to 35% of the consumers actually redeeming their rebates, it's simply not worth the risk of alienating or upsetting (and thus losing) a customer. Be in the business of paying, not rejecting.
- ***Sitting on the funds.*** Traditional rebate companies have typically taken long periods of time to pay valid rebates. These companies may add to their bottom lines via interest on the withheld cash, but do so at the risk of angering and frustrating consumers awaiting their rebates. The better solution is again to do just the opposite: For those consumers who do take the time to mail in their rebate forms, pay them quickly and efficiently. In addition to increasing customer satisfaction, this practice will also result in higher customer retention and a higher likelihood that the customer will use and trust the vendor again for additional rebate offers.

Dos and Don'ts

In order to maximize the effectiveness of their rebate solutions and to remain legally compliant, manufacturers need to follow some simple guidelines:

- ***Always display the full price of the product***. Consumers need to be made aware of and fully understand how much they are going to pay.
- ***Never display only the "Price (after rebate)."*** For example, it's okay to say that a product is $39.95 with a $10 Mail-In Rebate and the Price after Rebate is $29.95. It's not okay to say that a product is $29.95 after $10 Mail-In Rebate and not display the $39.95. In addition to being misleading, this practice is also illegal in some U.S. states.
- ***If you're offering a rebate that will be converted into other currencies, don't say that the product is free after the rebate—even if the rebate is the same value as the product.*** The exact amount the consumer ultimately pays for the product will almost always be an unknown because the consumer's credit card company will most likely charge them a conversion fee (often built into the rate shown). Because that fee will never exactly match what the rebate processor charges, the consumer's total net price will never be zero.
- ***If you have restrictions about how, where and/or when a rebate can be used, state them clearly and up front.*** There are few things that will make a consumer angrier than thinking he's been tricked or that the rules were changed without his knowledge.

Conclusion

Online vendors now have the ability to use rebates as a discounting solution that yield the same kinds of positive results retailers have been experiencing for years. When rebates are done right, everyone wins. ESD/e-commerce companies' revenues increase because the gross sales are higher; vendors profit due to low redemption rate; and consumers ultimately pay less for software while being introduced to more products via alternative offers. It's just good business all around! ■

Studies have shown that consumers who are offered the chance to instantly double or triple their rebate value (rather than mailing in a rebate form) will accept alternative offers as often as 40% of the time.

Open For Business

Tips for Boosting Your E-newsletter Open Rates

By Paul "The Game Master" Hyman

Paul "The Game Master" Hyman has covered the video games industry for over 15 years; he currently writes for Gamasutra.com and Game Developer *magazine, among others. As editor-in-chief of www.OpenMoves.com/games—an e-marketing boutique—he creates e-newsletters for such game-related companies as Ninja Kiwi, GameTap, FOG Studios, and Digital Artist Management. E-mail Paul at paul.hyman@casualconnect.org.*

With rare exceptions, the e-marketing goals of game developers are typically to generate repeat business, create communities around their games, and drive traffic to their websites. Regular, consistent e-newsletters are one of the best tools to achieve such goals—and following best practices is the foundation of e-newsletter success. In this edition of *Casual Connect,* we look at a couple of tips to boost your e-newsletter open rates.

TIP #1: Pick the Right Day and Time to Send

If you're sending your e-newsletter to consumers, evenings and weekends are best. That's because most people subscribe to e-newsletters using personal rather than work e-mail addresses, and they're likely to encounter your message while in a "personal time" frame of mind. On the other hand, if your target is businesses, you should consider sending your e-newsletters in batches that hit during working hours (keeping time zones in mind). Furthermore, you should avoid sending your e-mails first thing in the morning. Rather you should wait until people have cleaned out their inboxes so that your message will get more attention when it arrives. Likewise, tests have shown that open rates are higher on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays than they are on Mondays and Fridays.

TIP #2: Don't Underestimate the Importance of the Subject Line

The subject line is the only clue your reader gets as to what's in your e-newsletter before deciding whether to open it or junk it. You may want to use the recipient's name, you surely want to use an action verb, and you absolutely must include the most interesting point you make in the body of your e-newsletter—like this, for instance: "Bob, embrace these 10 sure-fire salary-boosters!" Consider what would convince *you* to open an e-newsletter and follow suit. Remember, when your content is strong and relevant to your audience, a powerful subject line is *much* easier to generate. Last point: Write your subject line *last*—after you've finished writing the e-mail content.

TIP #3: Give Lots of Thought to Your "From" Box

One of the keys to getting someone to open your e-mail is familiarity. You can always send your e-newsletter using your company name in the "from" box, but you may be able to boost your open rate if you send it from someone on your team whom they know personally. For others, your product's name may be even more familiar. The point is to signal in the "from" box that the message comes from a trusted and familiar source. Only you know how your customers will respond best.

TIP #4: Content, Content, Content

Let me say that again: Content, content, content. Remember that your readers will be hearing from you regularly—and whether they want to hear from you again depends mostly on what they learned or enjoyed reading the last time you sent them your e-newsletter. Bore them once and they may never want to hear from you again. So put a lot of thought into the content of whatever you're sending. Ask yourself: *If I received this from some other company, would I want to read it? And afterwards, would I be glad I did?*

Running out of things to say? Consider these sources of inspiration:

- ***Current Industry News:*** Read your industry's e-newsletters, websites, and magazines, and share with your readers the interesting news you find there. But don't simply repackage someone else's content. As you share your opinions on the latest trends and innovations, your readers will start to view you as a real expert in your field.
- ***Employee Profiles:*** Let your readers get to know your company through your employees. If they like your games, they're going to want to know who created them.
- ***About Your Company:*** Forget the facts and figures for a minute; let them know your history, mission, and future plans. What's on the drawing board? The more "confidential" information you share with them, the more engaged they will be. What insider info are you willing to divulge?
- ***Tips and Tricks:*** If you have a small space to fill, a quick tip or trick is always a winner. Sometimes the shortest content has the greatest impact. ■

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Why Brain Fitness Works Out

Opportunities for Game Developers and Publishers

By Alvaro Fernandez

Alvaro Fernandez is co-founder and CEO of SharpBrains, a leading market research firm responsible for The State of the Brain Fitness Software Market 2009 *report, covering the market and research for cognitive assessments, training, and games. A member of the World Economic Forum`s Global Agenda Councils, Alvaro has been quoted in* The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, *and on CNN. He recently co-authored the book* The SharpBrains Guide to Brain Fitness: 18 Interviews with Scientists, Practical Advice, and Product Reviews, to Stay Sharp. *Alvaro received masters degrees in education and business from Stanford University, and teaches at the UC Berkeley Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. He can be reached at alvaro@sharpbrains.com*

In our 2009 market report, SharpBrains estimated that the 2008 market for U.S. brain fitness games (that is, applications designed to assess or enhance cognitive abilities) was $265 million—an increase of 165% over 2005. We estimate the U.S. revenues for this category will continue to grow, reaching between $1 billion and $5 billion by 2015.

Market growth since 2005 has come in roughly equal parts from two segments: consumers, and health-care and insurance providers. A major driver here is the aging population which is already looking for a wider array of mentally stimulating products. To give a sense of magnitude: The number of people over the age of 55 in the USA is expected to grow from less than 60 million in 2000 to close to 100 million by 2020. *(see Figure 1)*

As those numbers might suggest, the future of brain fitness games is full of promise, especially since there is growing research showing that a variety of video games (strategy and action games in particular) can bring brain and cognitive benefits to children and older adults.

The Nintendo *Brain Age* story

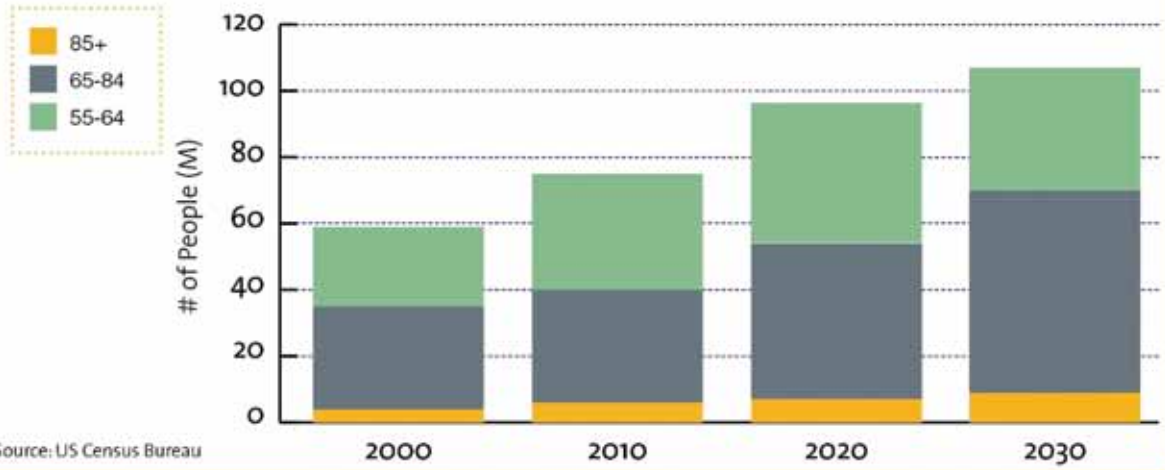
Most of us are familiar with the incredible commercial success of *Brain Age* and its sequel. What may not be so transparent is that Nintendo capitalized on a pre-existing Japanese "brain training" trend.

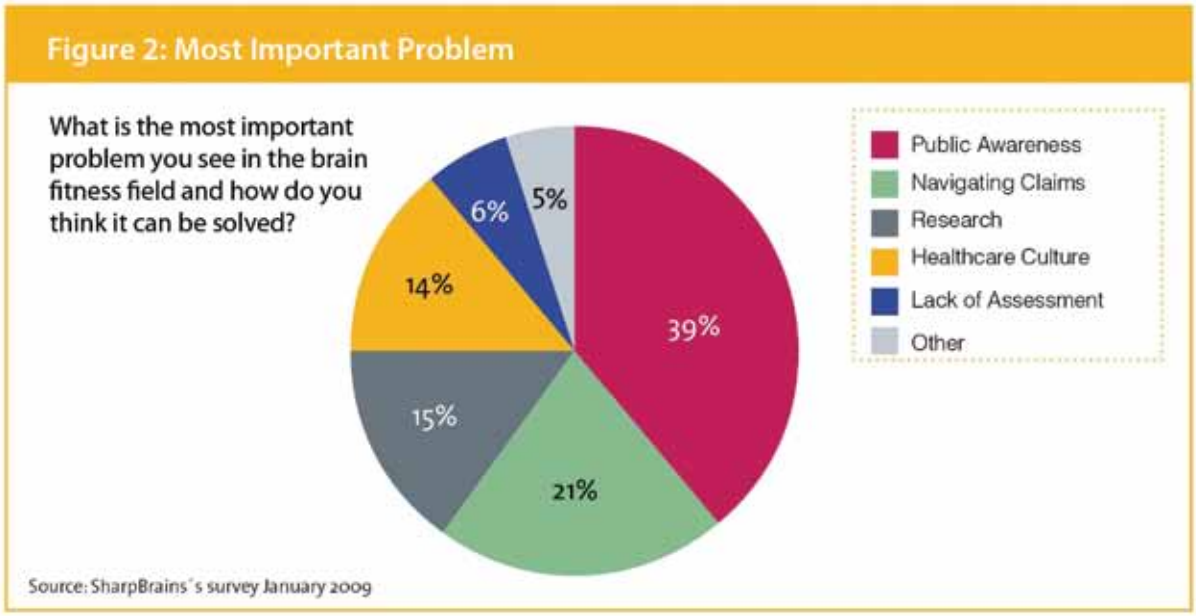
Nintendo didn't really focus on the science, but it did show how to make and launch a successful product. Several ingredients of its formula merit further analysis:

- ***Link to Familiar Activities:*** Include some of the activities that consumers believe are good for their brains: crossword puzzles, Sudoku, learning another language, learning a musical instrument, reading, and so on. Before Nintendo, Dr. Kawashima had sold over two million workbooks in Japan filled with math and read-aloud drills that followed a storyline similar to what later became *Brain Age.* And in the U.S. the game owes part of its popularity to the fact that it allows you to play Sudoku electronically—a much more efficient experience than using pen and paper.

Research has shown that certain kinds of games can help to stem aging-related cognitive decline or to accelerate rehabilitation of vision. Some games can also boost cognitive skills.

Figure 1: Projected U.S. population growth over 55 years old (2000–2030)





- ***Simple Design, Easy to Use:*** *Brain Age* features an easy-to-follow flow and design, a clear reward system, and lots of positive reinforcement. Furthermore, the sideways orientation of the Nintendo DS makes it very easy for a non-gamer to pick it up and scroll through it. From a game-design perspective, it is clear that Nintendo did a good job.
- ***Quick Benefit:*** Even though Nintendo claims no clinical validation of the efficacy of the game, we have read and heard from multiple users that "It helps me quickly become more alert" and "It is like grabbing a coffee in the morning." In this respect, then, the benefit of playing *Brain Age* is similar to that which comes from doing a crossword puzzle or Sudoku, except the play is much faster and the game is more interactive.
- ***Word-of-Mouth:*** The game is easy to play even for non-gamers, which has helped mobilize committed evangelists to become a bridge between gamers and non-gamers, even across generations.
- ***Localization:*** One size does not fit all. By adding Sudoku to the U.S. version, Nintendo boosted *Brain Age*'s popularity significantly.

The State of the Research

Can games actually be good for you? There is indeed little doubt that is the case—although not all games are equal. Research has shown that certain kinds of games can help to stem aging-related cognitive decline or to accelerate rehabilitation of vision. Some games can also boost cognitive skills. Let me summarize two of the Research Executive Briefs written by leading neuroscientists for our 2009 market report:

1) The University of Rochester´s Daphne Bavelier and Shawn Green tested the effects of action video games such as *Unreal Tournament* and *Call of Duty* on children (7–18) and young adults (18–29). They found that action video games can significantly improve both perception and attention. Research by some of their collaborators has shown that this type of training can nearly eliminate typical gender differences in spatial cognition abilities.
2) Arthur Kramer of the University of Illinois tested a strategic video game (*Rise of Nations*) on adults 60+ and found that playing the game for a total of 23 hours during a four-to-five-week period was enough to translate into measurable memory and reasoning improvements. Kramer adds that "Playing cognitively-challenging, strategic games, along with exercise, social interaction, diet, and other cognitively challenging activities, can help maintain and enhance cognition and help delay the onset of age-associated neurodegenerative disorders." The point here is that video games are not "magic pills" but can certainly be part of a brain-healthy lifestyle.

Room for Innovation

Consumers have become more interested in brain games largely as a result of the emerging convergence of general fitness, brain fitness, gaming, and lifelong learning trends—especially among savvy baby boomers. For example, a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey released in late 2008 found that older gamers tend to play games more frequently and that, despite an inverse relationship between age and gaming, the average age of gamers is increasing.

In addition, we recently polled several thousand early adopters of brain fitness games and found that customer satisfaction rates are high. In fact, several video games ranked higher than their traditional pen-and-paper counterparts. What is needed now is more help to guide consumers (and the professionals serving them) through the maze of games out there. In January 2009, we polled 2,000 decision-makers and early adopters to identify attitudes and behaviors related to the field of "brain fitness" (a term we chose in 2006 based on a number of consumer surveys and focus groups). One of the key questions we asked was: *"What is the most important problem you see in the brain fitness field and how do you think it can be solved?"* We kept the question open-ended in order to see what was top of mind for respondents. Here's what we found *(see Figure 2)*:

"What is the most important problem you see in the brain fitness field and how do you think it can be solved?"

- Public awareness (39%): "To get people to understand that heredity alone does not decide brain functioning."
- Navigating claims (21%): "How do we separate marketing hype from stuff that really works?"; "The lack of standards and clear definitions is very confusing, and makes a lot of people skeptical."
- Research (15%): "Determining what activities are most beneficial to the user with the minimum level of effort or most overlap of already existing effort."

Why Brain Fitness Works Out

Opportunities for Game Developers and Publishers

- Healthcare culture (14%): "Integration within existing healthcare infrastructure will require research, education, culture change."
- Assessment (6%): "Development of standardized and easily accessible assessments of cognitive status that could be used by individuals and organizations to test the efficacy of cognitive improvement methods."
- Other (5%): "Get information and products out to all the people, perhaps a drive to get them in public libraries."

Games for Health Conference 2009

Over 350 innovators attended the Games for Health Conference in 2009—the highest attendance in its five years. At the conference, developers, researchers, clinicians, and insurers joined together to explore ways to leverage gaming technologies to support healthy lifestyles.

As part of the conference, SharpBrains led a new two-day Cognitive Health Track which attracted around 80-100 attendees. Four other tracks dealt with a variety of other topics, from exer-gaming to games for people with disabilities.

We had 18 speakers present 13 sessions covering all major angles: demographic and scientific trends, institutional and consumer distribution channels, clinical applications, venture capital investments, research findings and challenges, multi-platform approaches, game design, and main obstacles faced by the sector and ways to address them.

Three major highlights:

1. This is no longer an academic endeavour but a real emerging industry. You know the field is a serious business opportunity when you have an executive from auto insurer Allstate explaining how they are running a pilot with 8,000 drivers over the age of 50 to see if specifically-designed "brain games" can reduce crash rates and improve driving safety.
2. There is a great deal of new research by leading scientists measuring the cognitive impact of a variety of games and technologies. For example, last year the Government of Ontario created a new Centre for Brain Fitness in order to develop and commercialize technologies, including games. Any developer interested in conducting good scientific studies should know that there are willing partners out there.
3. There are several viable business models: Nintendo sells games along with the DS; Posit Science sells computer-based software; Lumosity.com offers online subscriptions. Even so, there is still a lot of room for innovation. The field is evolving very quickly with solid growth drivers.

My suggestion: Jump in now with well thought-out "experiments" and learn from experience. ■

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Get Up and Play

Promoting Wellness Through Active Casual Gaming

The next big thing in any market has to create buzz, solve a huge problem, or be great fun. The fun part is easy for the casual game industry—but buzz and solutions are a bit more elusive. What is the "next big thing" that could excite millions of potential customers in our market? We hear a lot these days about how many hours a day people of all ages are spending in front of "screens," playing online games and expanding their sedentary lifestyles along with their waistlines. The cost of overweight and sedentary habits is kicking our health care system into dangerous double-digit billions. Perhaps that's a problem we in the casual games industry can help solve together while creating some brilliant buzz.

The wellness gaming industry is on the verge of a serious boom. Although wellness gaming generated only around $2 million in 2005, by 2015 revenues are expected to reach $2 billion.

Wellness Gaming

Technology has generated easier ways to design and deliver awesome games. Recently developed technology can also allow us to step to the forefront of "wellness gaming"—gathering fresh attention, new customers and solutions along with great game-play. Wellness gaming is a very specific genre that is aimed at sharpening the mind and body. Research has shown that casual games are good for the mind, just as working a crossword puzzle can help an elderly mind stay sharp. Computer and console-delivered brain games claim to take that benefit to a different level. In reality, there is no need to limit our computer games to the brain. The full gamut of fitness, balance, agility, cognition, productivity, and fun can be bundled into a powerful new genre of casual game play.

The wellness gaming industry is on the verge of a serious boom. Although wellness gaming generated only around $2 million in 2005, by 2015 revenues are expected to reach $2 *billion*. Wellness gaming has already been adopted by the U.S. Army, professional sports teams, and other large organizations aimed at getting their constituents mentally focused. Insurance companies have taken great interest in the genre as a way to help boost their insured's health and safety, especially among the elderly driving population.

So what's the future like? You can bet on more money being poured into wellness and fitness gaming. The fitness industry now produces some $20 billion dollars annually. Think what might be possible if casual games could tap into the fitness craze.

Making Games More Active

For the most part, wellness games have focused more on the brain than on the body. Often, in an attempt to make a game achieve certain goals and agendas, the fun-factor is lost. In the world of console games, Wii Sport, Wii FIT (Nintendo) and *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami) delivered some serious hits that got a world of buzz and business. Because of that foundation, most people understand the concept of wellness gaming or games that deliver fitness as well as some brain benefit.

One way to make casual gaming more active is to provide some sort of low-cost, easy-to-use computer peripheral that engages the whole body. One such solution is the FootPOWR pad. This patented device looks like the dance mats conventionally used in dance video games. The similarity ends there, however. Microcontrollers turn the dance mat into a computer peripheral that can do anything a mouse can do. You simply plug the pad into the computer USB port, install the software and stand on the pad. Then just use your feet to move the cursor or control select keyboard input. Suddenly many hundreds, even thousands, of existing casual games can become physical and balance-generating "wellness gaming" activities. The pad essentially reinvents the computer "controller," transforming the mouse and keyboard into a dance-mat type

By Judy Shasek

Judy Shasek, M.S., is the Chief of Creative Synergy for FootGaming, LLC. She has 17 years of experience as a fitness/education consultant and 12 years as a public school teacher, curriculum designer, fitness trainer and casual game player. She can be reached at judy.shasek@casualconnect.org.

Get Up and Play

Promoting Wellness Through Active Casual Gaming

Active casual gaming can deliver a new paradigm of what it looks like to play casual games on the home computer. With active casual gaming there's always the choice to get up, move and "play with your feet!"

Above left: Casual gaming the FootGaming way is ageless. Above right: Casual games improve cognition at school. Above: Teens in FootGaming Tournament

tool that requires rhythmic activity and balance. As an added bonus, the pad even logs steps and extrapolates them into miles covered and calories burned—an additional sort of score-keeping that comes automatically with every integrated game. Thus it's possible to deliver an immersive, intuitive, fun alternative that provides active gaming for computer users of all ages.

The Benefits of Active Casual Gaming

There is growing evidence that physical activity affects the brain in ways that improve cognition, focus, productivity and even mood. In fact, over 200 academic studies have connected regular exercise breaks to academic success.

"Exercise in many ways optimizes your brain to learn," said Dr. John Ratey (2008), a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. One reason, he says, is that exercise improves circulation throughout the body, including the brain. Exercise also boosts metabolism, decreases stress and improves mood and attention, all of which help the brain perform better.

If active games could deliver these benefits to students, could they also be beneficial for other age demographics? Research funded by casual game companies like PopCap Games and RealNetworks, for example, demonstrated the value of casual games in reducing stress, providing mental balance, and reducing anger.

According to a 2006 survey sponsored by PopCap Games, almost half of the estimated 150 million consumers who regularly play computer-based puzzle, word, and family-friendly, non-violent action games are age 50 or older. When asked to identify the benefits they had experienced playing casual games, 74% of these older gamers cited cognitive workouts (mental exercise), 86% noted stress relief, and 62% mentioned memory strengthening.

Real-world Reaction to Active Casual Gaming

When users are introduced to the idea of active casual gaming, the response is generally enthusiastic. In a recent FootGaming tournament at Cat 6 video lounge in Bend, OR, none of the competitors gave a thought to any wellness benefit. They were moving jewels in *Bejeweled Twist* (PopCap) and racking up foot steps for bonus scores for the pure and simple fun of it. Kyle Smith, 12, focused on the screen in front of him, rotating the brightly colored shapes so they would line up and win him points

But instead of just sitting there, sedentary in front of a computer, he balanced on one foot and darted from front to back and to the side, stepping on a specialized game pad to control the cursor in front of him. He hopped around, pressing the different keys, lining up on-screen diamonds and rubies, racking up points and making it past several levels before his time ran out. "It makes it really fun with all the steps," said Kyle. "I kind of had to hop around and wobble a bit."

Kyle's experience from the teen perspective aligns with what most wellness game companies observe in the older female demographic. According to Shufflebrain's Amy Jo Kim, "A lot of women don't play games because they don't want to waste their time." Inasmuch as 85% of wellness gamers are women, active casual games can help resolve their guilt towards gaming by integrating familiar fun with a wellness outcome.

For the elderly, active casual gaming provides important physical therapy that they might not get otherwise. At age 82, Doris has been an avid *Bejeweled* and *Bejeweled Twist* player for years. Adding activity to her game play has improved her balance tremendously. She explains, "I enjoy using FootPOWR as my controller because I move my feet to move the cursor,"

Balancing Fun and Fitness

We all know that if the right balance isn't struck between science, fitness and entertainment, no matter how great the perceived wellness benefits might be, the games will never be adopted by our target audiences. Nintendo successfully married fitness and fun to the tune of approximately $6.2 billion in annualized sales in 2008. Nintendo's *Brain Age* and *Brain Training,* casual brain fitness games, have sold 13 million units and generated approximately $260 million in sales over the 34-month period between May 2005 to March 2008.

For casual game companies working hard to grow market share, the wellness-gamer segment could be huge. We've all heard how many "soccer moms" buy and play casual games. That percentage has never been more important than right now. Active casual gaming can deliver a new paradigm of what it looks like to play casual games on the home computer. No kids slouching on the couch laptop in hand, no easy snacking by families as they play into the night—with active casual gaming there's always the choice to get up, move and "play with your feet!"

Active casual gaming could have the additional benefit of bringing a whole new set of advertisers into the space. Top food and beverage companies such as Kraft, Coca Cola, Pepsi and Kellogg's have voluntarily regulated changes in their advertisements to better promote health and wellness. These companies now lace their online fare with "wellness" messages. The opportunity for casual game companies to connect in-game advertising, activity-infused advergames, and vast new revenue streams is huge. ■

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-Brett Bibby
Founder, Gamebrains

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